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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of leadership is to be strong,
but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold,
but not bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy;
be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not
arrogant; have humor, but without folly.

—Jim Rohn

Effective schools require effective leaders. Though we admit this may appear as nothing more than a penetrating glimpse into the obvious to many educators, we believe the point cannot be understated. Furthermore, we believe that a hefty dose of common sense, in addition to all of the supporting research and literature in our profession, answers the question, Does leadership affect the quality of learning and schools? The answer is a definitive “Yes!” Educational leaders do matter—a lot.

As practitioners and students of the professional learning community (PLC) process, we have been amazed and humbled by the many wonderful transformations that schools are making as they redefine their mission to ensure learning for all students, rather than simply working to ensure that all students have been *taught*. At the same time, however, the inability of some schools to either recognize the need for change or implement the needed improvement initiatives deeply saddens us.

A quick review of literature reveals there is no shortage of information on what leaders must understand about PLCs to develop a strong focus on vision, mission, values, and goals; formative and summative assessments; collaboration; effective teaching and learning; and response to intervention (RTI) and interventions. As Kegan and Lahey reflect on many well-known best practices in education, “Ninety-five percent of what we need to know to provide excellent learning opportunities for all of our children is probably already known. We are already well informed, and it is maddeningly insufficient” (2001, p. 232). The question of what effective leaders must *know* to lead their PLCs haunts us less than the question of what effective leaders actually *do*. This compels us as authors to actively search for answers, and whenever we work with educational systems striving to become PLCs, they too ask us these questions.

Any number of factors can determine whether improvement initiatives will prove successful. Through both our personal experiences of working with effective leaders across North America and the overwhelming supporting research for this project, however, we have come to the conclusion that leadership is *the* single most important ingredient in successfully reculturing and restructuring our schools to operate as PLCs. We also have come to believe that the *lack* of effective leadership at all levels—from teacher leaders to

superintendents—is the defining variable in schools that fall short of being able to successfully implement important PLC practices.

Since 2000, we have been blessed to work with hundreds of schools and school leaders as they worked to implement PLC practices in their districts and schools. During this time, we met outstanding leaders and witnessed great success stories as districts and schools completely transformed themselves by embracing the fundamental changes in assumptions and practices that come from moving from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. At the same time, we saw a fair number of schools that tried to restructure and reculture themselves as PLCs only to run into roadblocks and hurdles that stalled, and sometimes derailed, their efforts. As much as the inability of some schools to transform as PLCs has disheartened us, we have been curious about their struggles as well.

The PLC Knowing-Doing Gap

Our close examination of schools that have not been able to initiate or sustain PLC processes has demonstrated that the critical variable is a lack of effective leadership. What surprised and interested us about these districts and schools is that many of their leaders are hardworking and thoughtful, and they have a fairly strong understanding of the big ideas that drive the transformation into a PLC. We quickly realized during our research that while a clear understanding of the big ideas is important, it is never, ever, enough.

Consider the following descriptions of leaders we met who demonstrated an understanding of PLC concepts but had difficulty initiating and sustaining PLC practices in their schools:

- Leader A has read all the books on PLCs, attended numerous conferences, and even participated in a PLC summer institute. At the start of the school year, the leader purchased copies of a PLC book for all the teachers and declared that they would become a PLC. Much like a cheerleader or a fan at a sporting event, Leader A spent considerable time praising the work of teachers and students when good things happened in their school. Unfortunately, the school spent very little time and effort on actually doing the work necessary to become a PLC, and there was no noticeable gain in student learning. At the end of the year, however, despite the lack of progress, Leader A celebrated the fact that nearly a dozen teachers participated in the PLC book study.
- Leader B worked tirelessly day in and day out to reshape the structure and culture of his school as a PLC. Leader B had a clear understanding of the work that his school needed to do. To get started, Leader B assumed a tremendous burden by working from teacher to teacher and student to student in an effort to align curriculum; help write clear, student-friendly learning standards; develop common formative assessments; provide meaningful and relevant feedback to teachers and students; and create interventions for students when they were not

learning. Through no fault of the leader or his sheer force of will and effort, the teachers still seemed confused, and the school managed to witness only slight to modest improvement in student achievement.

- Leader C worked hard to create a safe, warm, caring environment for everyone. Teachers, students, and parents liked and respected Leader C. While attending school activities, sporting contests, and cocurricular events, Leader C talked passionately about creating a PLC school. When working with teachers, however, Leader C practiced the art of “olé” leadership. Like the matador in a bullfight, Leader C would wave the cape of PLCs as the authority for change. Leader C sympathized with teachers’ frustration and increased workload but explained that the district’s commitment to PLCs required that they complete the work. Leader C explained that the district office issued a top-down mandate to implement PLCs across the district. Although some teachers began meeting in groups throughout the year, they initiated very few significant changes, and no noticeable gain in student achievement occurred as a result.

What we find fascinating about these leaders is that they all could articulate what a PLC is and what it should look like. There is no doubt that these leaders had a clear picture of the big ideas of PLCs. They also had a solid understanding of effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These leaders knew what they needed to do. So what happened? What went wrong? Why are some leaders effective and others not?

As you might imagine, *knowing* the big ideas is not enough. No matter how smart someone is, no matter how great a classroom teacher a leader once was, no matter how effective he or she may be at building relationships, an effective leader must be *doing* the work of implementing and sustaining the concepts of a PLC in the daily lives of his or her districts, schools, and teams in order for significant change to take place.

The Research

Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, Rebecca DuFour, and others have given us a clear picture of what professional learning communities are doing to produce better results for students. As practitioners working every day in schools and as PLC associates, we both have been given the special opportunity to learn from the PLC architects and other associates. We were able to consult and work with schools on their journeys toward functioning as PLCs. And PLCs are getting results. Under the direction of effective leadership, the process of becoming a PLC works exactly as envisioned and described by the PLC architects. Some leaders, however, are more effective than others; they not only achieve improved results more quickly, but they also achieve long-term sustainability. These are the leaders we worked to identify and study for the guiding research question behind this book: *What are the practices of effective leaders (central office administration, building administration, and teacher leaders) in districts and schools that function as exemplary PLCs?*

Our plan was to spend time in successfully functioning PLCs and to pay considerable attention to what effective teacher, school, and district-level leaders were doing to initiate and sustain meaningful change. Educational researcher Janet Schofeld suggests:

Research in education can be used not only to study *what is* and *what may be* but also to explore possible visions of *what could be*. By studying what could be, we mean locating situations that we know or expect to be ideal or exceptional on some *a priori* basis and then studying them to see what is actually going on there. (1990, p. 217)

More than anything, we wanted to explore the strategies, practices, and skills of leaders in schools functioning as exemplary PLCs to determine what those leaders were actually *doing* to help their schools succeed. To guide our curiosity and answer our questions, we visited and interviewed effective leaders in central office, building administration, and classroom teacher roles at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The leaders we identified had been doing the work of PLCs for more than a year and had already demonstrated clear results in student achievement. Furthermore, DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour had recognized the majority of their schools as exemplary and included many of them in the effectiveness database on the AllThingsPLC.info website. We created the protocol in table I.1 to guide our inquiry.

Table I.1: Research Protocol

Question	Purpose
1. Do you believe there is a difference between leading within a PLC and leading within a traditional system? If so, what is the difference? If not, what is the same about it?	Identify the distinctions of PLC leadership.
2. If you were to isolate the three leadership practices that <i>most</i> help you to be effective in leading PLC work, what would those three practices be, and why is each important?	Identify key leadership practices that are helpful in leading PLC work, and establish the value of each strategy.
3. How did you identify that you needed those three practices, and what did you have to do to grow them in your own leadership work? Please be specific about any strategies you used to develop these practices.	Identify the ability to recognize and develop effective leadership practices.
4. Should these three practices be encouraged at all levels of a PLC organization?	Evaluate the transferability of the leadership practices.
5. How do you grow these practices in your colleagues?	Evaluate the transferability of the leadership practices.
6. Describe some of the setbacks and mistakes that you experienced in your PLC journey before you defined or fully mastered these leadership practices. Be specific, and provide examples.	Identify the kinds of setbacks that can occur when key leadership practices are not in use.

Question	Purpose
7. Describe some of the greatest successes or triumphs you have experienced as a result of the practices you employ. Be specific with examples in your explanation.	Celebrate the practices used well.
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about leading in a PLC? Is there any question I have not asked or any important idea I might not have discovered during our time together?	Provide an open option for leaders to share any additional insights or information.

We began our research with a working hypothesis—based on our own experiences working with remarkable educational leaders and healthy PLC-based systems across North America—about the practices we thought we would find along the way:

- We believed we would find that strong PLC leaders create vision and support it with rationale.
- We believed we would find that strong PLC leaders build collaborative cultures.
- We believed we would find that strong PLC leaders articulate expectations and empower teams to meet those expectations in unique and powerful ways.
- We believed we would find that strong PLC leaders are reflective practitioners.

As we conducted our interviews, we listened to see if the practices we identified were, in fact, the practices that strong leaders employed. We listened to determine which strategies or beliefs might support the practices we anticipated finding. Finally, we listened to discover and explore any leadership practices that we might have misunderstood, missed altogether, or misrepresented in our initial hypothesis.

We found that for the most part, our hypotheses proved to be true; however, the framework that emerged from our many interviews intrigued and delighted us with a new sense of coherence and clarity. We discovered we were on track with the kinds of practices effective leaders employed, and that even though the practices aren't sequential, they definitely build on one another in significant ways. For example, using just *some* of the practices can create change, but will not suffice to sustain change. We were even more excited to find that anyone, anywhere could replicate the leadership strategies and practices we identified in effective teacher, school, and district leaders—if they were willing to try.

During the course of our research, we had the wonderful opportunity to interview many masterful leaders at the central office, building administration, and teacher levels across North America. Although they sometimes struggled to articulate what they did that worked so well, they were eventually able to do so with specific examples and strategies. They taught us so much.

In her description of effective educational research, Schofeld suggests that “research studies gain their potential for applicability to other situations by providing . . . comparability and translatability” (1990, p. 208). In order to achieve that applicability, translatability, and credibility, we have compiled the stories of these leaders into case studies and interview transcripts. Although we would have loved to recognize and celebrate the wonderful leaders we interviewed for this project in the text, ultimately we decided to keep their stories confidential so they could continue to work comfortably with their colleagues in the settings they described for us. We found these remarkable educational leaders to be what Collins describes as Level 5 leaders in *Good to Great*: “a study in duality: modest and willful, humble and fearless” (2001, p. 22). We remain grateful for the insights, expertise, and humility of these outstanding leaders. While modest about their own skills and successes, they have proven willful in their commitment to share what works and fearless in their effort to build leadership capacity in others.

A Leadership Framework—The Missing Link

Over the past fifty years, our profession has seen the development and articulation of numerous theories of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Many of these theories have been a tremendous help, as they have contributed to an understanding of the concepts, practices, and strategies that must guide the work of classroom teachers. Given the strong literature and research base (Danielson, 2007; Jacobs & Johnson, 2009; Marzano, 2007; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2011; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2007; Wiliam, 2011), we seriously doubt that anyone would suggest it is not important for teachers to develop a coherent theory of effective practice to guide their daily work. Having a coherent conceptual framework and a solid understanding of effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment allows teachers to develop meaningful learning opportunities for students, provide research-based instructional strategies that promote student engagement, and formatively assess student progress over time. Of course, one can only imagine the difficulties a teacher would experience without a coherent theory to guide daily practice. It would be the teaching equivalent of going on a 180-mile road trip without a map or a compass and with no clear picture of how to get from here to there.

What surprised us in our research was that the single most important difference between leaders who are successful and those who are not is that *the work of effective leaders reflects a clear understanding and a coherent theory of leadership*. In the same way that effective teachers develop deep clarity regarding what effective classroom instruction looks like, effective leaders must develop deep clarity regarding what effective leadership looks like in their districts, schools, and teams. Effective leaders understand that leadership is more than just saying they prioritize relationship building, create a climate for learning, or give teachers what they need and then get out of the way. We have found that the missing link between ineffective and effective leaders in high-performing PLCs is that effective leaders build a framework for leadership development

and then engage the entire system of educators in creating a solid understanding of leadership to guide their daily work.

Mike Schmoker eloquently states, “Clarity precedes competence” (2004, p. 85). We could not agree more. Through our experiences and research, however, we have found that having clarity—understanding the big ideas of PLCs—while necessary, is not sufficient for developing effective leadership. So we offer a corollary conclusion: clarity precedes competence, but competence demands capacity building. Prior to successfully initiating and sustaining PLC practices, leaders must have deep clarity about what work they need to do and an understanding of how the work needs to be completed; most importantly, however, they must continuously build their own capacity and the capacity of others to actually do the work of becoming a PLC. Only by learning and using proven and effective leadership strategies and practices will leaders develop the capacity to successfully lead schools as PLCs.

The practices and strategies we identified throughout our study are not altogether new. In fact, they are well supported and discussed in research-based literature on how to lead in schools that operate as PLCs. We have found that effective leaders of high-performing PLCs are deliberate in their efforts to create structure and culture in their districts, schools, and teams that support learning for everyone—community members, board members, administrators, faculty and staff, parents, and students. At the same time, we have found that the most effective leaders are curious about their own practices and are engaged in a cycle of continuous reflection on how they might be able to improve. It is our sincere hope that this project will offer new insights and specific ideas worthy of replication to readers intent on improving their ability to provide effective leadership. *Leading by Design* is our attempt to contribute to the professional dialogue, provide a point of departure for conversation, and offer a conceptual framework of leadership—relentless, passionate leadership.