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Introduction

If you are the principal of a professional learning community (PLC) that is struggling to find its collaborative footing, we are willing to bet you have had the following experience: You break free from the emails, phone calls, and paperwork that typically chain you to your desk, finally making it out into the classrooms to check in on your teachers and students. You are energized because you know that the real work of PLCs—ensuring that *every* student experiences academic success—never happens in offices; it happens in classrooms and on professional learning teams (PLTs). Excited to see how teachers are progressing, you stop by a meeting to observe a team that should be engaging in a meaningful discussion about curricular priorities and intervention protocols. But when you walk into the meeting, you are met with the following:

- Tension and tangible uneasiness about the format of common assessments
- Little evidence of data being used to drive instructional decisions
- No real talk of team efforts to craft intervention experiences for students
- Groups of teachers broken into competitive factions that disagree about almost everything

Or worse yet, you find the following:

- Teachers planning field trips and honors assemblies, because talking about learning is just *too* difficult
- A half-empty classroom, because a handful of team members are no-shows
- A completely empty classroom, because the meeting disbanded after fifteen minutes of small talk and semiprofessional chatter

On paper, the PLC model sounds nice and neat. In reality, however, collaboration can be messy, complicated, and difficult. While the professional organizations that represent educators (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1987; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003), and the individual experts who study educators (Buffum et al., 2008; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Schmoker, 2004) have long been convinced that PLCs are the best strategy for helping schools improve, the simple truth is that meaningful collaboration around student learning is rarely pretty. In fact, at multiple points in any PLC's development, there will be challenges that threaten to derail the entire process.

Problematic combinations of personnel and traditional school structures can make collaborative learning seem inefficient, ineffective, or downright impossible. Staff turnover can strip away organizational knowledge and commitment. Increasingly diverse student populations make intervening on behalf of every student difficult. But the biggest barrier to PLC success can be summed up in one word: inertia.

In the first year or two of implementation, PLCs typically experience a real sense of change: the master schedule is tweaked to make time for collaboration, teachers generate shared lists of essential outcomes and develop common assessments, and a few PLTs may even begin working on targeted interventions for students. Most importantly, pockets of tangible reform blossom, leaving everyone energized.

Then everything seems to slow down. Teachers begin grumbling about independence and standardization. PLC cheerleaders become disenchanted as skeptical colleagues fall off the collaboration bandwagon. New directives come down from the central office, pulling away energy and resources. Teachers come on board who know little about the building's core mission and vision or about the shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning that defines successful PLCs. Commitment to the process wanes and then, as is so often the case in school reform, the PLC model becomes just one more thing tried and left behind—another checked box on a discarded school improvement plan: “We did our PLCs. Check.”

The underlying problem in PLCs struggling to maintain momentum is almost always one of mindset; collective doubt seeps in as teachers faced with new challenges begin to question just how doable collaborative work really is. As Harvard business researchers Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer demonstrate in *The Progress Principle* (2011), mindset is a problem organizations in almost every knowledge-driven profession face. When employees have to fight to believe that the work they are engaged in is at once meaningful *and* possible, their work suffers. They become less creative, less productive, less committed, and less likely to embrace collaborative behaviors.

On the other hand, when employees are confident in their own abilities, the abilities of their coworkers, and the abilities of their organizations, their motivation and commitment levels soar. They are more likely to tackle problems and invest extraordinary amounts of time and energy into improving their practice. Perhaps most importantly, they are more likely to take in stride the inevitable hurdles that are a part of life in a complex, knowledge-driven workplace (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). “In other words,” write Amabile and Kramer, “the secret to amazing performance is empowering talented people to succeed at meaningful work” (p. 2).

So how can you empower the talented people in your PLC to succeed at meaningful work? The key rests in creating the conditions that make real progress possible. As Amabile and Kramer (2011) explain:

Real progress triggers positive emotions like satisfaction, gladness, even joy. It leads to a sense of accomplishment and self-worth as well as positive views of the work and, sometimes, the organization. Such thoughts and perceptions (along with those positive emotions) feed the motivation, the deep engagement, that is crucial for ongoing blockbuster performance. (p. 68)

Progress is heavily dependent on the choices organizational leaders make. Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler explain in *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* (2008) that for organizations to make

lasting changes, leaders must identify and target vital behaviors within the organization, and then figure out how to change those behaviors. In *Great by Choice* (2011), Jim Collins and Morten Hansen argue that the best leaders are less revolutionary than you may think. Instead, they carefully observe what works—and what doesn't—in an attempt to build on the foundations of proven practice. In *The Innovator's DNA* (2011), Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christensen prove that innovation within organizations depends on more than just imagination; it depends on leaders who excel at helping their teams deliver.

Our goal in this book is to help you take tangible steps toward what we call “progress-driven leadership.” Progress-driven leaders accept that the work in schools is complex and challenging, but they nevertheless work to identify and focus on the pivotal organizational behaviors that will lead to improvements. Progress-driven leaders recognize that their teachers and staff need to feel the pull of positive, forward momentum, and that successful collaborative communities learn how to fight through inertia.

Drawing from our own experiences as the leaders of PLCs that have succeeded, struggled, and at times completely stalled, we will show you the vital behaviors you should be targeting, the proven practices you should be polishing, and the collaborative skills your teams should be mastering. In the end, our hope is that you will walk away from *Making Teamwork Meaningful* knowing that making progress depends on something more than just hope and luck. Instead, making progress depends on the leadership you provide.

Chapter Overviews

Broken into five chapters, *Making Teamwork Meaningful* examines how highly effective school leaders manage the most common challenges in collaborative schools. We explore actions that can help school leaders safeguard their schools against complacency and study how staffing decisions can strengthen PLCs. We review the characteristics of instructional schedules and differentiation efforts that prioritize learning. Finally, we detail strategies for ensuring that every teacher—regardless of field—has meaningful collaborative opportunities, and we study the kinds of professional development that teachers depend on in order to work together effectively.

There is no one right way to read this book. Each chapter is designed as a stand-alone primer on a key to achieving student success in a PLC. If you are new to a collaborative environment, an environment in which educational decisions are regularly made interdependently rather than independently, working your way through the entire book will help you gain a complete overview of what you can expect in the next few years. For those of you who are already leading learning communities, selecting individual chapters that offer timely and appropriate reminders or support may be a more productive use of your time. To help you decide on the right strategy for reading, an overview of each chapter follows.

Chapter 1: Getting the Right People in the Right Places

Schools are people-driven organizations, and collaboration depends on who you have in your building, so hiring the wrong people—or having the right people in

the wrong places—can cause collaborative organizations to stumble. This chapter focuses on how to best complete your school’s personnel jigsaw puzzle. We identify the kinds of hiring and support practices that can transform staff turnover into an opportunity to strengthen your PLC. We also explore the nuances and complexities of personnel assignments for instructional staff. The suggestions we present are designed to leave you better prepared to get the right people in the right places, an essential first step for making progress possible in collaborative communities.

Chapter 2: Incorporating Singletons and Teachers in Small Schools

Organizing teachers into practice-centered groups is just plain easier for the principals of 1,000-student schools with five teachers working in the same content area and at the same grade level. How do the principals of small schools create productive collaborative learning opportunities for teachers who are often working in departments of one? Similarly, how do principals create meaningful learning teams for the more traditional singletons—art teachers, media specialists, and band directors, for example—in their buildings? Chapter 2 offers suggestions for tackling this all-too-common source of PLC frustration.

Chapter 3: Aligning a Master Schedule With PLC Priorities

Whether on a whiteboard in a conference room or in a spreadsheet on a hard drive, every principal has a working version of next year’s master schedule somewhere close at hand. A master schedule is the ultimate arbiter of any school improvement effort, and it can be one of the biggest barriers to—or one of the biggest facilitators of—PLC progress. It is a structure that school leaders must carefully design to support people and organizational priorities. This chapter introduces readers to a series of key questions that leaders should ask and answer when developing their master schedules, and then it provides simple recommendations for creating a schedule that makes collaborative time for teachers and structured interventions for students possible.

Chapter 4: Building an Intervention System

To help all students succeed, schools must identify essential curricula, assess student needs, and provide differentiated instruction that meets all learners at their instructional levels—where they are in their knowledge and skills—which is often easier said than done. The sheer complexity of building a truly differentiated instructional program can be overwhelming, and this complexity is perhaps the most frustrating barrier for established PLCs. Remodeling a school to make it truly responsive to students is the ultimate progress challenge of a PLC. Chapter 4 identifies specific steps that administrators can take to make schoolwide interventions a standard part of doing business.

Chapter 5: Improving Collaborative Capacity

At the end of the day, improvements in student learning depend on improvements in teaching quality. Teachers on high-functioning PLTs have the opportunity to learn

and grow through collaboration, but true professional improvement requires more. Chapter 5 is centered on the notion that progress-driven leaders are committed to developing people—both as individuals *and* as members of collaborative groups. We begin by describing the evolution that most PLT's work through. We then outline the skills necessary for teachers to work effectively in collaborative groups and detail the characteristics of professional development experiences that sustain progress.

Conclusion

In *Learning by Doing* (2006), PLC experts Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many write:

When people begin to act, people begin to hope. When people begin to gain hope, they begin to behave differently. When people behave differently, they experience success. When people experience success, their attitudes change. When a person's attitude changes, it affects other people. This is the essence of reculturing schools into professional learning communities. (p. 6)

Making Teamwork Meaningful will give you the courage and the skills necessary to take action when facing five common PLC frustrations: (1) the complexity of the personnel jigsaw puzzle, (2) the placement of singleton teachers, (3) the development of a master schedule that prioritizes collaborative opportunities, (4) the implementation of a successful intervention system, and (5) the support of individual and group skill development. While the work won't always be easy, progress is possible, no matter who you are or how far your school has traveled in your journey toward a more responsible and productive tomorrow. Positive change depends on nothing more than creating collaborative structures that make meaningful work possible.