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Introduction: Why Use These Pages?

The first and most brutal fact that must be confronted in creating PLCs is that the task is not merely challenging: it is daunting. It is disingenuous to suggest that the transformation will be easy or to present it with a rosy optimism that obscures the inevitable turmoil ahead.

—DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006

When we googled “professional learning community,” we got more than seventy-eight million results. There is no doubt that the concept of teachers coming together in teams to work collaboratively on goals designed to improve student achievement has gained momentum. Other excellent books lay out the essential characteristics and driving mission of professional learning communities (PLCs), such as *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*™ (DuFour et al., 2006). We assume you are familiar with the framework; perhaps you’ve even established your PLCs or are a year or more into the process.

So why add another book to the abundance of material out there? Because the evidence is in: researchers agree that launching PLCs may be easy, but turning them into productive, sustainable teams that improve adult and student learning is difficult. Researchers concur that developing effective PLCs takes years, even with extensive support (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Hargreaves, 2007; Hord, 2004; Kruse & Louis, 2007). Bruce Joyce (2004) points out that educators have tried—and failed—to build collaborative teams in the past, under guises such as team teaching, the middle school reform model, whole-school action research, and other school improvement efforts. His concern is that without care, the PLC movement will similarly fade away. The following paragraphs highlight some of the most insightful quotes from research on creating PLCs.

Shirley Hord reflects on an extensive project she undertook to implement effective PLCs that included significant outside support and professional development:

Despite the enthusiastic embrace of PLC principles in many schools in this study, despite the efforts of co-developers and [Southwest Educational Development Laboratory] staff, and despite various levels of success in each of the other four PLC dimensions, the powerful, multiple, and entrenched barriers to shared personal practice remained virtually unmoved after 3 years of effort . . . teachers did not visit one another’s classrooms, collaboratively review student work, or engage in significant critical feedback with their colleagues. (2004, p. 152)

Andy Hargreaves (2007), in the concluding essay of a book about research and PLCs, describes his concerns about shallow implementation of PLCs:

From their promising early beginnings, so-called professional learning communities are increasingly turning into something else. Instead of being intelligently informed by evidence in deep and demanding cultures of trusted relationships that press for success, PLCs are turning into add-on teams that are driven by data in cultures of fear that demand instant results. Data-driven instruction ends up driving educators to distraction—away from the passion and enthusiasm for rich processes of teaching and learning in classrooms and enriched relationships with children, into a tunnel-vision focus on manipulating and improving test scores in literacy and mathematics by any quick fix available—more test preparation here, after-school classes there, concentrating on cells of children who fall just below the line somewhere else. All this does nothing to enhance the actual quality of teaching and learning. (p. 183)

Grossman et al. (2001) analyze their experiences after two-and-a-half years of professional development work with a teacher community:

In contrast to the idealistic visions sketched in the advocacy literature on teacher community, bringing teachers together can hurt as well as help, especially when norms for interacting in a public sphere are ill defined. Reducing isolation can unleash workplace conflicts that were, ironically, kept in check by the very isolation in which teachers work. To assume that teachers, just because they have experience in creating social organizations among children, can spontaneously organize themselves into congenial social units reflects a romanticism that misrepresents the realities of group dynamics in complex settings such as schools. (p. 991)

Gunn and King (2003) express similar reservations as a result of their efforts with an interdisciplinary team. They state, “Our analysis reveals the complex and often-contradictory work of teacher teams. Hierarchies can emerge, individualistic tendencies can persist, genuine consensus can be elusive, and members can be silenced” (p. 191).

Achinstein (2002) examined the micropolitics of teacher communities and the enormous conflicts that arise when teachers discuss beliefs and practices. She concludes, “Policy makers should reconsider naïve initiatives that put teachers in groups and expect them to learn and grow, disregarding the complexity of the collaborative process and the time needed to navigate differences” (p. 450).

While some PLCs are indeed able to move quickly to deep collaboration, different groups may be at different stages even within the same school. As one professional development coach put it, “We are in our third year of PLCs. While some groups are functioning well and data/assessment gathered is driving instruction, other groups are still spending their time spinning the same old wheels over the same old topics.” This book is designed to help you stop the spinning—or help you launch PLCs with as little spinning as possible—by providing tools that help you collaborate efficiently and effectively as you focus on student learning.

Note that Beth, for example, prefers ENFP, but her years as a school administrator provided excellent practice in developing her Judging side. Jane prefers INFJ, but working as a facilitator and coach provides plenty of opportunities to expand her Extraversion skills. Type, though, helps us pinpoint what we find most exhausting or tedious and then locate strategies to help us do the best we can.

The Case of the Critical Colleagues

Returning to our opening story, Teacher 1 preferred ENFP while Teacher 2 preferred ENFJ. That one-letter difference caused them to pass judgment on each other. Yes, Teacher 2 used more structure and routines, but careful observation showed that her hallway marionettes were actually playing a version of follow-the-leader. Her students looked forward to their turns. As for homework at recess, Teacher 2 used those infrequent moments to get to know each student better. Yes, students missed recess, but they thrived on the one-on-one attention.

And while Teacher 1 hadn't unpacked all of her books, she covered all of the materials, using various technologies and small groups, rather than assigning books to each student. She also found value in following the Finnish model of interspersing fifteen minutes of outdoor time with sixty-minute blocks of learning time. In her experience, the result was less time wasted on classroom-management issues.

Neither teacher had ever asked the other about why they ran their classrooms the way they did. When they learned about their differing personality types, they began to grasp how well each other's classrooms really worked. They could then make constructive use of differences in their PLC.

Reflection

Appendix A (page 155) contains full-page type descriptions for each of the sixteen types. Read through the page for your type, and use the following questions for reflection:

1. What factors are key in motivating you to participate fully in a PLC? What factors discourage you?
2. Reflect on prior frustrations you may have had with group work or collaboration. Consider your personality type to identify ways your needs were not met in those situations.
3. Write a note to your colleagues (although you may never share it) in answer to the prompt, "If you want me to be an effective PLC member, please . . ." If everyone in your PLC agrees, share these statements with one another.