

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

Five commitments for leading a PLC

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FOREWORD

By Dr Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones

The idea of a professional learning community (PLC) has become commonplace in the international research and professional learning literature. Under the right conditions, a professional learning community can be a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school transformation and change.

Empirical evidence suggests that improvement in student achievement, through professional learning communities, is accomplished as leaders and teachers collaboratively focus on securing quality learning for all students. In short, professional learning communities have three core purposes: professional learning; changes in instructional practice; and collective capacity building.

Increasingly, evidence shows that teacher collaboration, in the form of professional learning communities, leads to increased teacher efficacy and better classroom performance. Furthermore, it has been proposed that teachers working in a professional learning community can be a force for positive change and collectively they can provide a powerful platform for educational transformation.

While there is a large corpus of literature on the subject of professional learning communities, the field is missing a contemporary, grounded, practical resource that explores the relationship between professional learning communities and transformational practice. *Transformative Collaboration* is such a book. It brings together practical wisdom and a clear theory of action. The five commitments for leading a PLC underscore the importance of clarity, trust and evidence-informed action. The book is a tour de force of illustration, explanation and exploration of effective PLCs in action.

Transformative Collaboration is a book that offers an alternative perspective on PLCs, one that is predicated on deep professional trust and genuine professional autonomy. This book is not just about PLCs, rather it addresses the way in which professional collaboration can be a mechanism for positive school and system level transformation and change.

Transformative Collaboration offers leaders and teachers around the globe a concrete and research-based reason to work collectively and collaboratively. In the face of a global reform process increasingly predicated on standardisation, conformity and de-professionalism, this book will reinforce why teachers must be at the heart of collaborative change processes, not simply as recipients, but as the drivers and architects of school transformation and improvement.

PREFACE

You would be hard-pressed to find a team, school or system in education today that is not working to become more effective. From Robert Marzano and Michael Fullan to Dylan Wiliam, Michelle Jones and Alma Harris, there is consensus among the world's leading educational researchers that a collaborative approach to practice is the best way for schools to achieve results and improve student learning.

The authors of this book have cumulatively supported over 1000 schools in Australia and New Zealand to cultivate the collaborative culture required to meet the academic and social needs of every student. *Transformative collaboration: five commitments for leading a PLC* is the outcome of this experience, in combination with research from the field and educators' own views on how schools can make collaboration a priority. It is a book that takes you beneath the surface of the school as professional learning community (PLC) to explore the critical commitments that leaders must make in order to truly transform school culture and get the results that students deserve.

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION?

Collaboration is when colleagues in a school come together to share ideas, tools and strategies in order to make key curriculum, assessment, instruction, teacher development and leadership decisions. *Transformative collaboration* refers to the way in which PLCs utilise collaborative practice as the key lever for cultural and structural change that directly improves student and teacher learning.

Based on our experiences in schools, we strongly believe that collaboration is the key to transforming schools. In an educational setting, transformation through collaboration is likely to involve the change of beliefs, structures, attitudes and perceptions on schooling. In this respect, a PLC has the following transformative goals:

- to ensure that all students can and will learn at high levels
- to create conditions that enable teachers to work collaboratively to improve learning

C O M M I T M E N T 2

Find the courage you need to lead

The courage to lead is forged when something personally meaningful is at stake for you and for those in your sphere of influence. The vision must really matter to you ... Courageous leadership action comes from your commitment to your deeply held beliefs about the issue.

– Timothy D. Kanold (2011, p. 40)

In reference to urban education, Pfeffer (2007) once described improving student achievement as a hill to be climbed:

People have built quite successful careers – describing the hill, measuring the hill, walking around the hill, taking pictures of the hill, and so forth. Sooner or later, somebody needs to actually climb the hill. (p. 137)

In our view, leading a PLC can also be described as a hill to climb – although given the challenges involved, some may maintain that PLC leadership would be better termed a *mountain* to climb. Indeed, the following are just some of the difficulties that leaders face when it comes to transforming a school into a PLC:

- to release ownership over the collective inquiry to all the members of the learning community and resist the temptation to take control of the process
- to promote mutual responsibility for moving the inquiry process forward and resist the temptation to provide solutions
- to embrace conflict as a way to solve problems while resisting the temptation to advocate personal preferences
- to articulate and model a clear understanding of collaborative inquiry and resist the temptation to revert to quick fixes
- to lead a learning culture and resist the temptation to leave learning-centred leadership to others

Just like climbing a mountain, the notion of transforming a school into a high-performing PLC can seem daunting and overwhelming. Many questions enter our heads: ‘Where do I

begin? Where is the correct path? How long will it take? What if I fail or get lost?’ Like mountain-climbing, the commitment to lead a PLC requires the strong belief that the effort is worth it – that the summit will unveil new vistas, and that we will be rewarded when we reach our ultimate goal.

Commitment 2 in the PLC transformation incorporates the ideas of several thought leaders within the field of leadership. In particular, it draws upon the work of Robert Marzano, whose highly acclaimed life’s work has been dedicated to the study of effective teaching and leadership. Marzano has concluded that the best environment for great teaching and leadership is a powerful PLC (DuFour & Marzano 2011), and he provides compelling evidence that can help to guide leaders through the important journey of school transformation.

KEY ACTIONS

To explain Commitment 2, we will outline three key actions:

- **ACTION 2.1:** Find the courage to challenge convention
- **ACTION 2.2:** Find the courage to commit to growth
- **ACTION 2.3:** Find the courage to focus on what works

ACTION 2.1: FIND THE COURAGE TO CHALLENGE CONVENTION

It is an incontestable fact that quality of education directly impacts upon an individual’s chances later in life. Hattie (2011) calculates that Australian high school graduates earn 48 per cent more than those who do not complete high school; they also live six to nine years longer and are 10–20 per cent less likely to be involved in criminal activity. What’s more, it isn’t just a matter of simply attending school, since research has shown that ‘whether a school operates effectively or not increases or decreases a student’s chances of academic success’ (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 3). From their meta-analysis of 35 years of research, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2006) conclude that ‘school leadership has a substantial effect on student achievement’ (p. 12), while earlier research indicates that in higher-gain schools, teachers report their school leaders to be more active participants in teacher learning than in lower-gain schools (Bamburg & Andrews 1991).

Few leaders would argue with the statement that schools should provide high levels of learning for every student, and most would be quick to affirm the idea that their own work makes this possible. But how often do their thoughts, words and actions align with this belief? Our own experiences suggest that ‘walking the talk’ of PLC leadership may be easier said than done. When presenting to fellow educators, we have on many occasions put forward the foundational PLC belief that all students can learn, only to be met by an audience member’s incredulous questions: ‘Do you mean all students? Surely you don’t mean all students ...

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

COMMITMENT 2: FIND THE COURAGE YOU NEED TO LEAD

As you consider each reflective question, contemplate your response and identify the evidence that supports your thinking.

Action 2.1: Find the courage to challenge the status quo

- a. To what extent do your school's existing policies, words and actions align with the belief that all students can learn to high levels?
- b. Do staff at your school believe that all students can learn to high levels? If not, how can you change their minds?

Action 2.2: Find the courage to commit to growth

- a. What school improvement factors do you associate with all students being able to achieve at high levels? How could these factors be adapted or modified in your school?
- b. Where is your school on the five-level HRS framework? What more can you do to grow your school into a High Reliability School?

Action 2.3: Find the courage to do what is needed

- a. How can school leaders create a culture of innovation in which staff members feel secure enough to take risks and trial new ideas to improve teaching and learning?
- b. What is your role in ensuring staff are aware of the most current theories and practices regarding effective learning?
- c. Which of the seven responsibilities for second-order change best describes your approach as a leader? Which one do you need to work on most?

I N S I G H T S F R O M T H E F I E L D

“When I served as curriculum coordinator before we started the PLC process, I was trying to push all these planners and telling the staff, ‘You should be thinking about this, and you should have knowledge of this.’ But now, the teams are doing that themselves. They’re saying, ‘We need to get out the curriculum, we need to pick out the important parts of it, we need to understand it.’ And it’s more our role as leaders to say, ‘How can we support you?’ – which is so much nicer than feeling like you’re hitting your head against a brick wall.

As a leadership team, we need to help collaborative teams understand what it means to work as a team and support leaders to work alongside their colleagues. It’s really, really important for leaders to actually be part of the team, to actually be in there. In fact, leader is probably a bad choice of words. ”

- AMELIA, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

“The reason we started this journey in the first place was that we leaders were introducing lots of good things to help build teacher capacity, but our staff weren’t taking us up on it because they felt like they knew everything. Whereas the PLC process appeals to their core beliefs and makes them more likely to want to take it up. For example, one of our school leaders was creating time for teachers to go and visit other classes to look at good practice, and no one wanted to do it, then we got to the review and we were asking about that piece: ‘Nah, I haven’t had time, I haven’t been able to fit that in.’ The difference now is that the teachers are paying attention to the data, and using it to identify what they want to improve on. Which has meant they are now asking to go and observe someone else. Thanks to the PLC process, they’re seeing a reason for the professional learning. And these observations are actually driving some of the things we were wanting teachers to focus on. ”

- DREW, PRINCIPAL

“I feel that if you build a momentum in the PLC journey, it’s like a snowball going down a hill and people tend to get consumed by it. Yes, it will divert off at times, and sometimes it needs to divert off for short conversations around other things. But if you can keep re-addressing the issue by asking the right question – ‘How does that help with student learning?’ – it seems to be that the snowball will roll in the right direction as it’s going down the hill. It doesn’t veer off for very long. ”

- CHRIS, PRINCIPAL

Looking at Data Protocol

Collaborative teams use data to improve learning. Teams of teachers use this data to respond and monitor the success of teaching, learning and leadership. However, analysing data isn't always an easy process. It requires patience, organisation and, most importantly, the time and resources to respond to the findings.

The Looking at Data Protocol (McDonald et al. 2015) guides teams of educators to analyse student data and identify the strengths and challenges of practice. The protocol begins by inviting participants to identify the facts associated with the data without engaging in collaborative conversation. After the facts have been identified, the facilitator supports the team to dig deeper by offering additional thoughts about the data and providing evidence. Following this, participants identify strengths and problems using the data and conclude by offering recommendations for addressing the data. An example of the Looking at Data Protocol is opposite.

Australian collaborative teams are using the Looking at Data Protocol for a range of purposes. The protocol is utilised when schools are working on their mission and vision. Using large data sets such as NAPLAN and parent and student opinion surveys, educators can identify priorities for the school and set directions for further attention. The protocol also helps schools monitor progress towards goals that have been previously set and engage in reflection, redirection and celebration through analysis.

LOOKING AT DATA PROTOCOL

The protocol can be completed in 1 hour or less, depending on the number of participants (4 to 10 or more), and the times allotted to each step. In the version we present below, one participant serves as presenter, another as facilitator and a third as recorder.

Steps

- a. **PLANNING.** The presenter familiarises themselves with the data set in preparation for Step 2. This may in some circumstances require expert support.
- b. **ORIENTATION.** The presenter offers an orientation to the data set. This may include, for example, what the columns, rows and cells contain, what abbreviations mean, how best to read the tables and so on. They ask participants to hold questions for Step 3. (3 minutes)
- c. **FOCUS QUESTION.** The presenter suggests a focus question for the group's reading of the data. This is likely one that is related to a priority that the group or school has set. (3 minutes)
- d. **CLARIFYING QUESTIONS.** Participants ask questions on matters that they find unclear or confusing. If the presenter cannot easily answer, and if collective pondering yields little, then the questions are deferred for later expert consultation. (5 minutes)
- e. **FLAGGING.** Participants work in teams of two or three to call attention to particular data within the data set that may prove especially relevant to the focus question. They do not necessarily need to explain why they think attention is warranted. The recorder notes the flagged data – for example, by highlighting cells. Discussion is not permitted at this point. (10 minutes)
- f. **MAKING INFERENCES.** Participants work in teams of two or three to make inferences based on particular elements of the data set. Again, no discussion is permitted. The recorder records all the inferences on poster paper or by computer projection. (10 minutes)
- g. **DISCUSSION.** The facilitator invites open discussion about both the data elements that surfaced in Step 4 and the inferences that surfaced in Step 5. The recorder continues to record. (10 minutes or more)
- h. **STEPPING BACK.** In a go-round, participants state briefly what they see as next steps for the group, given their analysis and discussion. These may include additional clarification, further inquiry or action. (5–10 minutes)

Adapted from McDonald et al. (2015, p. 108–110)