

Solutions for Professional Learning Communities

How to Coach Leadership in a PLC



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Chapter 1

Laying the Foundation for PLC Leadership

Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

In reflecting on the shifts listed in the introduction, each requires change—change in how we operate, focus, work, and see ourselves. These changes do not happen without effective leadership that communicates a shared purpose, establishes a culture of collaboration, and motivates change.

Communicating a Shared Purpose

The starting point to lead these shifts and a commitment to continuous improvement rest on communicating a shared purpose to all engaged in the PLC. The foundation for PLC work rests on four pillars: (1) mission, (2) vision, (3) values, and (4) goals. Teams question, “Why do we exist?” “What must our school become to accomplish our

purpose?,” “How must we behave to achieve our vision?” and “How will we mark our progress?” (DuFour et al., 2010).

Leaders at all levels must build shared understanding of these four pillars so that there is alignment of beliefs, focus, and effort. This takes more than a one-time discussion or memo pointing out what is important; it requires clear, consistent reminders throughout the organization that this is who we are, what we stand for, and why we are engaged in this work. I was once reminded of how important it is as a leader to never assume others know what our priorities are. Rich Smith, while Sanger’s deputy superintendent, and I were working with a group of superintendents from a neighboring county and their cabinets to develop the focus of their PLC work. On our first day, we asked all of the superintendents to each take three sticky notes and list their three main district goals—the three most important things they were focusing on. We then asked each of their cabinet members to do the same. The superintendents placed their three goals on the table and had the cabinet members place theirs under any of their superintendent’s goals if they aligned, and if not, to start a new column. We then asked how many district teams had only three aligned columns of goals. None did! All districts had at least six, and some as many as ten columns, of main goals. The superintendents were shocked at how little clarity there was about the important work of the district. If this lack of common understanding exists at the cabinet level, what level of discrepancy exists at the site level? Establishing a sense of shared mission, vision, values, and goals is critical to developing the common intent that everyone in the system understands and embraces.

Expressing a Shared Identity

Every member of an organization has his or her own set of internalized beliefs and values as well as a sense of personal identity. Developing a sense of shared identity as an organization requires that despite our personal differences, we all understand the organizational

values. At Sanger, shaping the organizational culture was an ongoing project. We coached this shift in culture several ways. Since 2002, no outside voice has led the start-of-the-year general session; instead, the superintendent has led this gathering of all Sanger Unified employees to reflect on accomplishments and review goals for the PLC work ahead. Each year, a theme guides our focus on who we have to be to accomplish our goals.

We start simple and focus on our shared beliefs using John Christensen's (1998) video *FISH!*. This video, based on the work philosophy of Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, lays out four simple guidelines for how we need to approach our work:

1. Be there!
2. Make their day!
3. Play!
4. Choose your attitude!

We remind ourselves that it is important that we be present every day, not just in attendance, but engaged in our work, present in a very real sense. We have to take the time to validate others and recognize their efforts and contributions to our outcomes. We must find a way to laugh together so that the work we do and the place where we work together combines into something we enjoy. Finally, we remember that the only thing we have control over on any given day is who we choose to be, the attitude we bring to our work. Who we are in front of our students will determine the outcomes for those students that day. We must always be the adult who cares and believes in them; we must choose great—not good—if we hope to see great things happen. Those were expectations of all and a leadership coaching responsibility at all levels to be modeled.

Each year in succession, we continued to add themes to shape our identity. While the themes serve as powerful reminders of our vision and our commitments to one another as well as a great coaching tool

for leadership, our guiding principles have become the foundation of our shared values and shape our identity.

Confirming Direction With Guiding Principles

Shortly after our district fell into Program Improvement status, Rich Smith and I discussed the need to develop a clear and consistent message that would help shape our beliefs and drive our actions. Rich focused on three points that we shared with site leaders and the district office team and simplified them to frame what we called our guiding principles:

1. Hope is not a strategy!
2. Don't blame the kids!
3. It's about student learning!

These keystones of our organization were used each year at the general session, on documents, on posters, and as coaching tools for leaders at all levels to use to shape our identity and culture. The principles were simple, but they reinforced a commitment to our beliefs and directed our actions.

We can't hope things get better; it takes the deliberate actions of adults to change things. How many times have you heard someone say, "I sure hope my students do better this year," and yet he or she does what he or she has always done and wonders why the results are the same? If we want to change outcomes, it is our actions that must change.

"If they'd just give me better students, I'd get better results!" Have you ever heard that from a colleague? I have! Yes, it is true, many of our students come to us from a background of poverty, from broken homes, from abusive situations, and from homes where English is not the primary language. These factors and so many more are true about the students we serve. What is also true is that not one of these students chose the condition of life or factors influencing

her or him—it is the life into which the student was born. We are the only hope of changing that condition of life; education is the key. Learning for all is the need. We must know our students and respond to their needs by building systems of support around them that ensure their success. We must own the learning of every student!

“I don’t know what happened. I taught it; they just didn’t learn it!” Again, a comment frequently made but driven by an incorrect assumption. Teaching generates learning; teaching without learning is just presenting. If students didn’t learn it, we didn’t teach it! We must ensure that all students learn and that learning for all is the outcome of adults’ actions in every classroom. To this end, we must also be committed to being learners as well so that we learn from one another as we examine the results of our efforts. We share best practices, and we support one another. The best way for leaders to coach here is to be seen as learners as well, being transparent about results, seeking input from others, and constantly seeking to improve outcomes.

These guiding principles continue to form the core of the beliefs and values that drive the work of Sanger. The questions each of us must answer are: What are those core values, those guiding principles, that must become the leadership message of our organization? What are the messages that help us shape culture and coach the development of a shared identity?

Establishing a Culture of Collaboration

Shaping the culture of our organizations is a daily focus of leadership at all levels on our journey. *Who* we are—our identity and our relationships—must be a focus of our conversations and our actions. I am more convinced than ever that shaping the culture of our organizations is a critical aspect of leadership and one of the least emphasized.