

*Shifting From*

# Me *to* We

How to Jump-Start Collaboration in a PLC at Work<sup>®</sup>

M I C H A E L   R O B E R T S



**Hawker Brownlow**  
Education a Solution Tree company

# Table of Contents

*Reproducibles are in italics.*

<b>About the Author</b> .....	ix
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1

## CHAPTER 1

<b>“We’ve Met for Years, so Why Hasn’t It Changed My Practice?”</b> . . .	<b>7</b>
Understanding PLC Lite .....	8
Leading the Journey to Accountability .....	12
Establishing Your Mission and Vision .....	17
Summary .....	21
<i>Chapter 1 Discussion Questions</i> .....	22
<i>Chapter 1 Reflection Worksheet</i> .....	23
<i>Mission and Vision in Forty-Five Minutes</i> .....	25

## CHAPTER 2

<b>“If We’re Collaborating, Why Aren’t You?”</b> .....	<b>29</b>
Collaborating for Leadership .....	30
Forming a Guiding Coalition .....	32
Leading as a Team .....	34
Summary .....	38
<i>Chapter 2 Discussion Questions</i> .....	39
<i>Chapter 2 Reflection Worksheet</i> .....	40
<i>Building an Effective, Balanced Leadership Team</i> .....	42

## CHAPTER 3

**“We’re Supposed to Focus on a Few Things, but How Do We Decide What They Are?” . . . . . 43**

Committing to the Mission and Vision . . . . .	44
Selecting a Focused Set of Commitments . . . . .	45
Summary . . . . .	52
<i>Chapter 3 Discussion Questions</i> . . . . .	53
<i>Chapter 3 Reflection Worksheet</i> . . . . .	54
<i>Selecting Collective Commitments</i> . . . . .	56

## CHAPTER 4

**“How Do You Find Time to Support Learning When There Are So Many Other Issues to Deal With?” . . . . . 59**

Protecting Time in Classrooms . . . . .	60
Observing Efficiently . . . . .	64
Sharing Best Practices . . . . .	67
Including All Adults . . . . .	69
Summary . . . . .	72
<i>Chapter 4 Discussion Questions</i> . . . . .	73
<i>Chapter 4 Reflection Worksheet</i> . . . . .	74
<i>Worksheet for Calendaring Time to Be in Classrooms</i> . . . . .	76
<i>I Like, I Noticed, I Wonder Feedback Form</i> . . . . .	77
<i>Peer Observation Form</i> . . . . .	78

## CHAPTER 5

**“Won’t We Just Move On to Something Else Next Year?” . . . . . 79**

Staying Focused . . . . .	81
Aligning Other Initiatives With the PLC Process . . . . .	83
Tracking Data Over Time . . . . .	85
Summary . . . . .	87
<i>Chapter 5 Discussion Questions</i> . . . . .	89
<i>Chapter 5 Reflection Worksheet</i> . . . . .	90
<i>Professional Learning Plan Review</i> . . . . .	92
<i>Form for Tracking Data Over Time</i> . . . . .	94

## CHAPTER 6

**“How Do We Know If We’re on the Right Track?” . . . . . 95**

Setting Goals. . . . .	96
Celebrating Progress and Achievements. . . . .	101
Summary . . . . .	106
<i>Chapter 6 Discussion Questions</i> . . . . .	107
<i>Chapter 6 Reflection Worksheet</i> . . . . .	108
<i>Setting Yearlong Academic Goals</i> . . . . .	110

## CHAPTER 7

**“What Can We Do to Help?” . . . . . 113**

Communicating With the School Board. . . . .	114
Communicating With Parents . . . . .	116
Communicating With the Wider Community . . . . .	118
Summary . . . . .	120
<i>Chapter 7 Discussion Questions</i> . . . . .	121
<i>Chapter 7 Reflection Worksheet</i> . . . . .	122
<i>Planning Sheet for Presentation to a School Board or Community Organization</i> . . . . .	124

<b>Epilogue</b> . . . . .	127
---------------------------	-----

<b>References and Resources</b> . . . . .	129
---	-----

<b>Index</b> . . . . .	135
------------------------	-----

# About the Author



**Michael Roberts** is an author and consultant with more than two decades of experience in education. Michael has been an administrator at the district level and has served as an on-site administrator at the high school, middle school, and elementary levels.

Prior to his stint as the director of elementary curriculum and instruction in Scottsdale, Arizona, Michael was the principal of Desert View Elementary School (DVES) in Hermiston, Oregon. Under his leadership, DVES produced evidence of increased learning each year from 2013 to 2017 for all students and met the challenges of 40 percent growth over four years, a rising population of English learners, and a dramatic increase in the number of trauma-affected students. Michael attributes the success of DVES to the total commitment of staff to the three big ideas and the four critical questions of a professional learning community. This commitment has led to a schoolwide transition from *me* to *we*—a fundamental shift in thinking that has made all the difference.

Previously, Michael served as an assistant principal in Prosser, Washington, where he was named the 2010–2011 Three Rivers Principal Association Assistant Principal of the Year. In 2011–2012, Michael was a finalist for Washington Assistant Principal of the Year.

Michael earned his bachelor's degree in elementary education from Washington State University and his master's degree in educational leadership from Azusa Pacific University.

To learn more about Michael's work, visit <https://everykidnow.com>, or follow him @everykidnow on Twitter or Instagram.

@Hawker Brownlow Education

# Introduction

“But how do *we* do it?”

This is always the question when a district or school is striving to become a professional learning community (PLC). Teachers and school leaders study books on the PLC process, learn from experts at conferences, and visit model PLC schools to see the work in action. But applying PLC practices to their own schools is often a hurdle. Even after thinking, learning, and researching, educators may still find themselves wondering, “How do *we* get a motivated group of teacher leaders to guide peers toward accomplishing the fundamental purpose of the school? How do *we* get staff to share best practices across campuses? How do *we* get all adults on campus and external stakeholders to understand where we are going?” These types of questions can be paralyzing to an organization’s ability to develop a collaborative, *we*-oriented culture that will help all students learn at high levels. Yet, an absence of effective answers to these questions can prevent staff from even buying in to the idea of the collaborative process.

This book will guide you in responding to these questions, and it will do so by serving as a tool for you to use to confront the challenges that make these questions so daunting. Challenges include getting building administrators and teachers to see beyond their immediate *me* and look to a greater *we*, where best practices will support the learning of all students. When the entire school or district shares best practices, all students benefit. Yet many well-meaning, hardworking educators see it as a badge of honor to say things like, “I’m just worried about my students,” or “My students are different.” This single-mindedness is the paradigm most educators were raised in and has been a quality of great principals and teachers for over 130 years. Resetting individual thinking to a more global view of the district or school will take some work.

For example, I once had dinner with a lifelong friend who is a good teacher and a caring educator whom parents are excited to see on their students’ schedules. When he heard I was supporting the development of professional learning communities,

he grunted. He told me that one of his colleagues had been assigned to teach two sections of Advanced Placement U.S. history—his favorite class to teach. He went on to say he was frustrated because he had “built the program” and he was not happy that they were “both supposed to teach the same way.” He wanted to just be left alone to teach.

The interesting thing is, he once told me that he became a better football coach the day he started sharing responsibility with his assistant coaches. When they shared more ideas on the offense, the team got more wins. In short, he became a better coach when he began collaborating. I pointed this out to him, but I do not think he heard the logic of my point. Changing his mind—and the minds of thousands like him who still believe their classrooms are their singular domains—will take a lot of work by district and building administrators and strong teacher leaders.

Another of these challenges is the need to customize the development and operation of a PLC to each individual school. While customization is a challenge, it is also an opportunity that allows—indeed requires—district administrators, building principals, and teacher leaders to think about and experiment with content so they can make connections and utilize their learning and resources to tailor the PLC process for their own schools. With the guidance of this book, educators will take on this opportunity, this work of thought and experimentation. They will learn to create customized tight-loose cultures (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016), and in this process discover their non-negotiables to which all staff members will be accountable (the elements that are tight) while understanding in what ways collaborative teams and teachers may retain autonomy (the loose elements) to use their own professionalism and experience to determine the path they will take to meet the non-negotiable expectations.

After finishing this book, a district or school will have a process to follow. They will use their newly created systems and cultures to engender high levels of learning for all students and all staff. Teachers along with school and district leaders can use the process in this book in conjunction with the expert guidance of a PLC conference or professional development event, but these guidelines are equally useful for schools and districts embarking on a self-guided PLC journey. By sharing advice, common mistakes, and lessons learned, this book seeks to speed your district or school on its individual path toward becoming a true professional learning community. In the words of Kristopher Treat, a history teacher at Eastmark High School in Queen Creek, Arizona, becoming an accountable professional learning community “is not something you do wrong, wrong, wrong, perfect. It is a journey” (personal communication, June 3, 2018). An accountable professional learning community is



when educators work collaboratively to urgently eliminate gaps that prevent students from learning grade-level content and systematically provide additional, meaningful learning for students when they demonstrate proficiency. Teams should keep that destination in mind, but note that while a district or school is on that journey, *we are trying* and *not yet* are legitimate answers to questions about progress.

“Can a district or school guarantee that all students, regardless of the teacher they have, will learn at high levels?”

“Not yet.”

“Do all students get all the support they need to fill any gaps they may have in essential learning?”

“We are trying.”

“Are proficient students extending their learning?”

“We are working on it.”

Good—keep working, and hopefully this book will help guide you further down that road to becoming a true professional learning community.

To make this book easy to use, common questions for developing professional learning communities serve as the basis for each chapter. Each chapter addresses a question that school leaders often hear as they guide their schools toward becoming an accountable PLC. These questions come from all sides—teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. These questions were all posed directly to me when I was a building principal or district administrator, or to administrators I was working with. The chapters will provide specific information in response to the broad questions, followed by actionable steps to move an organization closer to becoming an accountable PLC.

Chapter 1 addresses the all-too-common issue of a school that conducts collaborative meetings, but the meetings have not had any effect on classroom instruction. In such a school, there is a disconnect between what is going on during collaborative time and the professional practices within the classroom. The investment of time is not leading to any kind of instructional payoff. The school is caught in what Richard DuFour and Douglas Reeves (2016) refer to as *PLC lite*. By focusing on how to clarify a school’s mission and vision, this chapter will help you operate with purpose and start or restart down the road to becoming a true PLC.

Chapter 2 focuses on leading by example and on how to be a collaborative leader. Leaders will find guidance on how to select teacher leaders and remove obstacles by empowering these staff members.

Chapter 3 highlights the importance of a narrow set of collective commitments involving a district's or school's focus on student learning and key adult behaviors. This chapter discusses a process by which all staff share collective commitments, planning vital learning outcomes to ensure all students are learning at grade level or higher.

Chapter 4 focuses on instructional leadership. Getting leaders in the classrooms and out of offices more often is key to improving learning across the school or district. This chapter discusses the rationale for increasing time in classrooms and offers a template to make this happen. Leaders will find ideas for changing routine staff meetings and creating time for staff to observe one another with the aim of spreading best practices across the school. Finally, this chapter addresses inclusivity in school leadership. Every adult in the organization must be part of the mission of the school.

Chapter 5 helps leaders maintain a district's or school's focus when outside forces threaten to distract. Districts and schools must limit the number of initiatives and sustain these practices over multiple years to ensure success. The three big ideas and four critical questions of the PLC process are the perfect conduit for finding sustained focus (DuFour et al., 2016).

Chapter 6 underscores the importance of setting goals and celebrating progress. This chapter focuses on how to set effective goals, as well as when, why, and how to celebrate. Goals provide a road map and celebrations support hardworking staff members. By including students in celebrations, leaders can also acknowledge the daily hard work of the students who make up the district or school.

Chapter 7 will bring attention to how to inform parents and community stakeholders about what a professional learning community is and how it helps students learn more effectively. District, school, and teacher leaders will find suggestions for how to share this information with their governing board and parents in support of the mission, vision, and collective commitments.

At the beginning of each chapter, you will find a learning target that sets the intention for your reading. In the book *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right—Using It Well*, Richard Stiggins, Judith Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Stephen Chappuis (2004) assert that “understanding the important learning targets is the essential foundation of sound assessment, and of good teaching too” (p. 15). This applies to adult educators seeking to expand their knowledge as much as it does students in the classroom. Two or three success criteria follow each chapter's learning target, which you may use to evaluate your own learning. As John Hattie (2009) states in *Visible Learning*:

It helps if these learning intentions and success criteria are shared with, committed to, and understood by the learner—because in the right caring and idea-rich environment, the learner can experiment (be right or wrong) with the content and the thinking about the content, and make connections across ideas. (p. 23)

Each chapter also includes examples from real schools and comments from teachers who have worked through the transformation from PLC lite to accountable professional learning community. They provide insight into how making this fundamental shift improves teachers' jobs and students' experiences. Keep in mind that the examples you'll encounter are specific to the schools and staffs that arrived at these steps and collective commitments. Use them to increase your understanding and inspire *your* work while recognizing that your district or school must come up with its own systems. Do not simply copy what other sites have done, for there is no faster way to lose your way as an organization than to try and walk in another's footprints. Create your own path to high levels of learning for all students based on your organization's strengths and needs.

Finally, each chapter concludes with discussion questions and other practical resources to help you and your team enact and customize the concepts presented in the chapter. These resources serve as jumping-off points so leaders can create unique plans for helping their organizations become accountable PLCs. For it is these unique plans, developed within the framework of a professional learning community, that catalyze staff to move beyond the *me* culture that has not enabled all students to be successful and get them to begin working as a *we* and supporting all students to learn at grade level or better.