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# Preface

## *Learning by Doing* for the Australian Context

By Gavin Grift and Colin Sloper

We are honoured to have been asked to re-version *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™, Third Edition* for an Australian context. As educators, authors and presenters of Professional Learning Communities at Work (PLC at Work), we have observed firsthand the difference this approach makes to improving student learning in our schools. From the 2010 pilot program in Australia where we worked with the authors of this book to become the first school recognised as an exemplar PLC at Work school, our learning has been ongoing, challenging and deeply rewarding.

Since that time, we have led the development of a large network of schools that are implementing PLC at Work and now have over fifteen associates working across Australia to support leaders and educators in transforming their schools. For us, *Learning by Doing* was the seminal book that influenced our thinking significantly and gave us a pathway to achieving our vision of better results for the students we serve. The key ideas, concepts and sense of optimism that emanate from *Learning by Doing* have allowed us to support educators since 2010 as they transform their schools into Professional Learning Communities at Work.

Collectively, our journey has led us to working with over one thousand schools in Australia and New Zealand where we have learnt so much from applying the principles of this book to their context. It is those learnings we draw from in the re-versioning *Learning by Doing* for an Australian context.

We owe a great deal of gratitude to the original authors for this work for the impact and inspiration they have had on our professional lives, leading us to the publication of the best-selling *Transformative Collaboration: Five Commitments for Leading a Professional Learning Community* and the launching of Solution Tree Australia – which we are honoured to be leading.

Our approach to adapting *Learning by Doing* for Australian educators is to ensure the language, context and scenarios align with our unique educational landscape. We bring to the book countless stories, experiences and learnings gained from our colleagues to assist readers in transforming their school into a professional learning community in their own unique context. Please note that in this edition the authors write

in the joint voice of we and to this end we are proud to include ourselves as part of this collective.

We want to thank all those colleagues we have and continue to work with for the dedicated way they are striving towards achieving high levels of learning for all students and hope that our contributions to Learning by Doing assist them to continue to do so.

Like us, we hope that you will be inspired to continue to see the power in learning by doing.

We dedicate our contributions to the memory of Rick DuFour for the legacy he leaves us and the inspiration his work continues to provide.

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## The Format

We continue with the format that we introduced in the second edition. Starting in chapter 2, each chapter of this handbook includes seven parts.

- Part One: The Case Study
- Part Two: Here's How
- Part Three: Here's Why
- Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey
- Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward
- Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community
- Part Seven: Dangerous Detours and Seductive Short Cuts

### Part One: The Case Study

Each chapter opens with a case study describing some of the issues and challenges that have arisen in a school or system that is attempting to implement the PLC process. The names of schools and people described in the case studies are fictional, but the situations presented are neither fictional nor hypothetical. They represent the very real issues educators must grapple with and resolve if they are to bring the PLC process to life in their schools and systems. Readers may be tempted to skip the case studies and move quickly to solutions; we urge you to resist that temptation. A critical step in assessing alternative solutions to any problem is to come to an understanding and appreciation of the problem itself. We hope you will take the time to consider each case study carefully, reflect on the issues it presents, and generate possible strategies for addressing those issues prior to studying the rest of the chapter. Engaging in this reflective process with your colleagues will further strengthen your learning.

### Part Two: Here's How

In our work with schools, we have found that *how* questions come in at least two varieties. One type represents a sincere and genuine solicitation of guidance from inquirers who are willing to act, and the other typically comes in waves as a series of "Yeah, but ..." questions. For example, after listening to an explanation of the PLC process, a teacher or administrator responds:

- "Yeah, but ... how are we supposed to find time to collaborate?"
- "Yeah, but ... how can we give students extra time and support for learning when our schedule will not allow it?"
- "Yeah, but ... how can this work in a school this big (or small, or poor, or urban, or rural, or suburban, or low achieving and, therefore, too despondent, or high achieving and, therefore, too complacent)?"

- “Yeah, but ... how can we make this happen with our ineffective principal (or unsupportive central office, or adversarial teacher union)?”

These questions are less of a search for answers on how to implement the PLC process successfully and more of a search for a reason to avoid implementation. As Peter Block (2003) says, “Asking ‘How?’ is a favorite defense against taking action” (p. 11). Block (2003) goes on to say, “We act like we are confused, like we don’t understand. The reality is that we *do* understand – we get it, but we don’t like it” (pp. 47–48). Our own work with schools has confirmed that a group that is determined not to act can always find a justification for inaction. Questions about *how* can have a positive impact only if those asking are willing to act on the answers. We challenge you as you read this book to begin with the attitude that you are seeking a solution for every obstacle instead of looking for an obstacle in every solution.

Therefore, the Here’s How sections in this book are written for those who seek ideas, insights, and information regarding how the PLC process comes alive in the real world of schools. Part Two of each chapter describes how educators bring a particular PLC element to life in their school. It presents exemplars for schools to use as a model as they work through the challenges of moving from concept to action.

We fully recognise that there is no precise recipe for school improvement (blending two parts collaboration with one part formative assessment does not work). We also understand that even the most promising strategies must be customised for the specific context of each system and each school. The most effective improvement models are those that staff have *adapted* to fit the situation in their schools and communities. In these schools and systems “leaders use an array of strategies and tactics to accommodate the contextual realities in which they operate” (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010, p. 62). Therefore, the Here’s How sections do not presume to present the answer to problems posed in the case study, because it is the dialogue about and the struggle with those problems at the school and system levels that result in the deepest learning and greatest commitment for teachers and administrators. Our hope is that this book can serve as a tool that educators can use to initiate the dialogue and to engage in the struggle.

***Even the most promising strategies must be customised for the specific context of each system and each school.***

### Part Three: Here’s Why

Informing others about how something can be done does not ensure they will be persuaded to do it. In fact, we are convinced that one of the most common mistakes school leaders make in the implementation of improvement initiatives is to focus exclusively on *how* while being inattentive to *why*. Leaders at all levels must be prepared to anticipate and respond to the inevitable questions and concerns that arise when educators are called on to engage in new practices. We have included Part Three in each chapter to offer useful tools – research, reasoning and rationale – to help clarify why the initiative should be undertaken.

Throughout the book we have provided a concise summary of research to assist in the consideration of the why question for a specific recommended action. Our review of research draws on, but is not limited to, the research base on education. We examine findings from studies in organisational development, change processes, leadership,



effective communication, and psychology because the challenges facing contemporary leaders demand that they look outside the narrow scope of their professional field for answers. We recommend that staff members be encouraged to review the summaries of research and to identify any research that refutes or contradicts it. In every case, the weight of the evidence should be apparent to all who consider it.

## Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

In each chapter of this handbook, we'll ask you to reflect on the current conditions in your school or system and assess the alignment of those conditions with the principles and practices of a PLC.

The assessment will present a five-point continuum.

1. **Pre-initiating stage:** The school has not yet begun to address this PLC principle or practice.
2. **Initiating stage:** The school has made an effort to address this principle or practice, but the effort has not yet begun to impact a critical mass of staff members.
3. **Implementing stage:** A critical mass of staff members is participating in implementing the principle or practice, but many approach the task with a sense of compliance rather than commitment. There is some uncertainty regarding what needs to be done and why it should be done.
4. **Developing stage:** Structures are being altered to support the changes, and resources are being devoted to moving them forward. Members are becoming more receptive to the principle, practice or process because they have experienced some of its benefits. The focus has shifted from "Why are we doing this?" to "How can we do this more effectively?"
5. **Sustaining stage:** The principle or practice is deeply embedded in the culture of the school. It is a driving force in the daily work of staff. It is deeply internalised, and staff would resist attempts to abandon the principle or practice.

The continuum in each chapter is based on the premise that it is easier to get from point A to point B if you know where point B is and can recognise it when you get there. The sustaining stage of the continuum explains point B in vivid terms. It describes the better future your school is moving toward on its PLC journey. But a journey from A to B also requires some clarity regarding the starting point. The continuum is also a tool to help educators assess the current position of their school or team so that they can move forward purposefully rather than fitfully.

This continuum can be administered across a system, school or team. Many systems have converted it to an electronic format and used simple survey tools, such as SurveyMonkey, to gather information on staff perceptions. Whatever format you use, we recommend that the process begins by asking each individual to make anonymous,

independent and candid assessments and to offer evidence and anecdotes to support their conclusions on each characteristic presented.

Once members complete their individual assessments, the results should be compiled and shared with all participants. Staff members can then analyse the results and use them to begin dialogue to clarify the current reality of their team, school or system. Participants should be particularly attentive to discrepancies in responses and explore reasons for the differences. Groups have a tendency to gloss over disagreements. One person contends the school is in the pre-initiating stage while another contends it is developing, and to avoid discussion, they merely compromise and settle for the initiating stage. Avoid that temptation. Delve into one another's thinking to see if you can clarify discrepancies and establish common ground.

## Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward

Each chapter includes specific suggestions and strategies to assist with the implementation of particular PLC processes. The primary purpose of this handbook is to encourage people to act, to learn by doing. But random actions do nothing to enhance the capacity of a staff to function as a PLC. The challenge facing leaders is to identify purposeful and focused actions that contribute to the goal of improved learning for students and staff alike. Part Five offers insight regarding which actions to take and which to avoid. It identifies tactics that offer the greatest leverage for implementing PLC processes and presents research-based and practitioner-proven tips for pursuing those tactics effectively.

## Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

PLC team members engage in *collective* inquiry: they learn how to learn together. But only when they focus this collective inquiry on the right questions do they develop their capacity to improve student and adult learning.

It has been said that the leader of the past knew how to tell. But the leader of the future will have to know how to ask. Those who lead the PLC process should not be expected to have all the answers and tell others what they must do. Leaders should instead be prepared to ask the right questions, facilitate the dialogue and help build shared knowledge. Part Six offers some of the right questions educators should consider as they work to drive the PLC process deeper into the culture of their schools and systems.

## Part Seven: Dangerous Detours and Seductive Short Cuts

It is the *process* of learning together that helps educators build their capacity to create a powerful PLC. One of the most common mistakes that they make on the journey is to seek ways to circumvent that process. This section alerts readers to some of the most common ways educators have attempted to avoid actually doing the work of a PLC so they won't fall victim to those mistakes.

***It is the process of learning together that helps educators build their capacity to create a powerful PLC.***