



# A NEW BEGINNING

Sitting at his desk, Steve could not believe his luck. Having worked as a building principal for the past nine years, he knew he was a respected leader with a wide range of experiences, but like most educators, he did not see himself as anything special. That is why his conversation over lunch with regional administrator Patricia Tines had caught him by surprise.

“Steve,” said Dr Tines, “I’ve got an important role for you to fill, and I’m hoping that you’ll agree to a bit of a change.”

Never one to shy away from change, Steve was excited. In fact, an inherent fear of stagnation had always pushed him professionally. He had moved from a successful ten-year career as a high school English teacher into administration, intent on having a greater impact on more students by working beyond the classroom—and once there, he discovered that he loved learning about leadership. Schools were tricky places built on social relationships and influence, but Steve was an old pro at using relationships to drive change. What is more, he spent countless hours reading, determined to understand the inner workings of organisations. He always seemed to get the most out of his teachers, and as a result, his schools always seemed to produce impressive results, regardless of the student population they served. Kids were learning in Steve’s schools, and he was incredibly proud of that.

“Allen Jenkins—the principal at Central Middle School—is retiring next year,” continued Dr Tines. “I’m sure you know that Central Middle has been one of the flagship schools in this area since it opened ten years ago. In many ways, it is the heart of our community. . . . I’d like you to be Central’s principal, Steve, and I’d like you to begin building a professional learning community from the ground up. What do you think?”

Steve knew immediately that this was an opportunity he would never pass up. He loved his current faculty—they had turned around a struggling building together in the span of four short years—but Central Middle’s visibility would make this position one of the most challenging he had ever considered, and Steve loved a good challenge. He accepted without hesitation. “I’m honoured that you’d think of me, Pat. Leading Central Middle is the dream of any principal. Count me in!”

Dreaming would not guarantee Central Middle’s success, though. Like any high-performing school, Central Middle would need a collection of determined teachers

willing to learn from each other, to perfect their craft and—most importantly—to work tirelessly on behalf of children. Steve understood that in most buildings, untapped power rested in the hearts and minds of teachers working collaboratively. He had seen it happen time after time in small pockets of every school that he had ever led: the elective teachers who found new ways to integrate reading into their classrooms, the maths teachers who identified a handful of skills central to student success, the social studies teachers who engaged in research with one another, studying the impact that their practices had on different groups of students.

While Steve had tried to spread the pockets of practice across his entire building in the past, his efforts always felt somewhat scattered. Instead of creating the conditions that would make such collective action a part of the very fabric of his schools, Steve found himself reacting to what he learned: seeing something impressive, introducing it to influential teachers and then hoping change would stick. “Central Middle School is going to be different,” Steve thought to himself. “We’re going to get schoolwide collaboration right this time, finding a way for every teacher to be a leader and a learner.”

Catching his breath, Steve made his first decision as Central Middle School’s new principal: he picked up the phone and called Michael, an old friend and one of Central Middle’s most talented, motivated and influential teachers. “Hey, Michael,” said Steve, “What would you think about helping me build a professional learning community?”

## Getting Started

What a fantastic opportunity! Dr Tines gave Steve the chance to take all of his previous efforts at supporting collaboration and make them the cornerstone of his new building.

But how exactly is that done? How can administrators and motivated teachers take the promise of a professional learning community (PLC) and turn it into reality? Whether starting in a new building or working with the same colleagues from the past fifteen years, how can school leaders transform theories of collaboration into highly effective nuts-and-bolts practices? This book is designed as a guide for accomplishing that difficult task, chronicling the efforts of Steve and his teachers to build a true PLC at Central Middle School and focusing on the successes and challenges inherent in the process.

The lessons in *Building a Professional Learning Community at Work* are drawn from our own experiences working in a variety of roles as practitioners—as teachers, building administrators, consultants and coaches—at the primary, middle and high school levels. From those experiences, we have learned that powerful collaboration can happen anywhere, but it requires hard work, purposeful steps and a deep understanding of the PLC model. The tools in this book have been tested time and again by our own teachers and our own teams, and our suggestions have helped to improve practices in our own schools. We hope this book serves as an effective introduction to the kinds of steps you can take to polish professional learning in your own buildings.



# STARTING WITH A VISION

Sarah thought that the last hour had gone well, but she still had a lot of questions. She was being interviewed for a position teaching year six at Central Middle School. The school's new principal, Steve, had spent the last hour asking Sarah about her teaching experience and philosophy, and she was satisfied with the answers she had given.

"Steve, when we spoke last week on the phone you mentioned that you were interested in leading a nontraditional kind of school. I think the term you used was a *professional learning community*. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about what you mean, what you want this school to look like?"

"Please do!" Steve responded excitedly. He had enjoyed getting to know Sarah and was convinced she was the kind of accomplished teacher he wanted as a part of his faculty; however, he also knew it was critical for those he hired to have a clear idea of what he hoped Central Middle School would look like in action so they could decide if it was the right fit for them. Hiring accomplished teachers who could not buy into a school committed to collaboration was a recipe for failure, and Steve was smart enough to know it.

"So what do you mean when you say a 'professional learning community'? How would that be different from a typical school, like the one I'm working at now?"

"That's a good question," said Steve. "Let me start by telling you a story about a woman I used to work with. She was a middle school science teacher, and she was famous for her dinosaur unit. Every year, during the second term—and I mean the whole second term—this woman would teach her students about dinosaurs. They learned about the different eras in which dinosaurs lived, they learned about how dinosaurs evolved, they made dioramas with different dinosaur habitats. For two months these kids lived and breathed dinosaurs.

"Now, when you went into her classroom, her students were working hard. They were engaged, they had smiles on their faces and they were learning a tonne about dinosaurs. The problem was, dinosaurs weren't part of her curriculum. In fact, not one of the concepts her students learned about was in the state standards for her year level.

"The more time I spent as an administrator getting into teachers' classrooms," Steve explained, "the more I realised that a lot of teachers had their own 'dinosaur' units: topics that they enjoyed teaching, but that had nothing to do with the curriculum. At first I wanted to go to these teachers and tell them, 'Hey, teach the curriculum the way

it's written!' But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that wouldn't have solved the problem. No one likes a heavy-handed principal, right?"

Besides, Steve knew that the real problem in most buildings was not about individual teachers and their favourite units; rather, it was about the underlying expectations of the environment in which they were working. Teachers who drifted drastically from the curriculum were expected to decide as individuals what they should teach, how they should teach it and how they should test it—and that is what they were doing. They were making those decisions the best way they knew how.

If he were to change teacher behaviour—get them to abandon their dinosaur units—he knew that he would have to change the expectations for how they made their decisions. That was his responsibility, not theirs.

"So how do you solve that problem?" Sarah asked. She understood Steve's frustration with dinosaur units—there was a guy teaching down the corridor whose pirate unit was the talk of the town. Sarah just was not sure Steve could really do anything to make people change. Plenty of her colleagues over the past seven years had learned to teach what *the administrators* wanted on the days they were observed and what *they* wanted for the rest of the year without consequence.

"Well, the reality is that it is impossible for me to monitor what's happening in every classroom, every day," Steve continued. "That's why I've decided that, at Central, my primary focus is not going to be to evaluate the individual decisions that people make, but to evaluate the way that people make their decisions.

"You asked me earlier what a professional learning community is. Now, I've been thinking and reading about PLCs for years, and for me it boils down to a couple of specific things, starting with the way people make decisions. In traditional schools, teachers make decisions individually—and everyone is going in entirely different directions. In a PLC, people make decisions collaboratively. That means my friend with the dinosaur unit can't decide by herself what she is going to teach. Instead, she's going to have to sit down with all of the other science teachers for her year level and decide as a team what they are going to teach.

"If she can convince her colleagues that they should be teaching about dinosaurs for two months, then more power to her," said Steve, "but when that team sits down with the standards and the curriculum guide, I'm guessing that she'll have a pretty tough sell."

Sarah looked a bit puzzled. "So what if that teacher just says, 'Forget it, I want to teach my dinosaur unit anyway'?" she asked.

"Well, that's where it becomes my responsibility," Steve explained. "But I'm no longer asking her to justify her dinosaur unit. Now I'm asking her to justify ignoring the collaborative decision of her peers. That's one thing that I will absolutely not budge on: if you're going to teach at this school, then you have to make the big decisions—especially curriculum and assessment decisions—in collaboration with colleagues."

personality strengths who share a high level of connectivity and influence, both inside and outside the organisation. Once the core team is established, it is important that administrators spend time with the core team, encouraging conversations throughout the group and creating opportunities for participants to discuss and debate the building's central principles, translating them into practical ideas and statements. At this point in the process, school leaders must be open to additions or revisions to their original principles. It is particularly important for doubting members of a building's core team to have opportunities to share their reservations. A leader's willingness to respect the voice of supporters and sceptics alike will build trust and commitment between administration and influential teachers. Core team members are experts with a deep understanding of the dynamics of human relationships within a building; effective leaders allow this knowledge to shape the central principles of a learning community without compromising their nonnegotiables.

The materials at the end of this chapter can help school leaders to carefully plan their core teams. Included are a brainstorming tool, *Who Are the Personalities in Your Organisation?*, that can be used to identify potential core team members and a tracking tool, *Balancing the Core Team*, that can help to ensure that the teachers you are identifying as leaders have influence across your entire building.

### **Ensure a Collective Process**

For the leader pushing a new vision, there is an important fact that has to be accepted: at a certain point, it's no longer the leader's vision, but rather a collective vision.

As long as everyone on the team commits to a central set of principles, the details will work themselves out—even when the details feel like the most important thing in the world and heated disagreements result over simple challenges. When the principles underlying the decision-making process are pervasive throughout a school—if the best interests of students are the goal *despite* the conflict over details—then the organisation can be successful and move forward in the face of any challenge.

For leaders, this means being willing to let go of details while reinforcing principles. For participants in the process, this means being willing to compromise, recognising that mistakes and frustrations are a natural part of the organisational learning process. As DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2008) argue, “Educators can clarify a general sense of direction at the outset of an improvement initiative, but a shared vision emerges over time as a result of action, reflection, and collective meaning based on collective experiences” (p. 145).

Both of these behaviours—letting go of details and being willing to compromise—are facilitated by opportunities for ongoing conversations focused on a building's core principles. The handout *Creating Opportunities for Dialogue* can help you to systematically create these opportunities for your faculty.

### **Value Relationships**

When establishing a core team, it is important to develop professional and intellectual connections, but it is equally important to establish congenial relationships.