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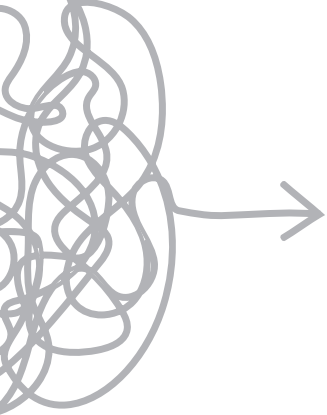
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Introduction

Using Your Great Power as a Leader

With great power comes great responsibility. Peter Parker, also known as Spider-Man, comes to this realization after a spider bites him and he is transformed into a superhero with exceptional powers, including the ability to sense impending danger. Initially, Peter doesn't know how to control and appropriately use his newly acquired powers. He struggles with how his power will affect others and what it means for his future. Ultimately, after his Uncle Ben reminds him that the decisions he makes will shape who he is for the rest of his life, Peter accepts that he needs to learn to harness his power and use it responsibly for the greater good. Peter relies on the insight of his uncle and others while facing many challenges and eventually learning how to control and utilize his powers to make the world a better place. In other words, he doesn't save the world alone.

Like Spider-Man, you are faced with challenging, demanding, important work every day as a school leader. You have great power and great responsibility, but you also have the wisdom and insight of fellow administrators, teachers, and students. You have the power and responsibility to create a collaborative culture focused on learning and results for students. You are not a superhero like Spider-Man, but you do have the power to make heroes every day. As Roland Barth, founder of the Principals' Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says, "The best principals are not heroes—they are hero-makers" (as cited in Johnson, Leibowitz, & Perret, 2017).

The challenge for school leaders is to figure out how to share this power and responsibility to create a focused, organized, and consistent school in which leaders and teachers collaborate, make evidence-based decisions, understand that the student is the top priority, communicate effectively, and are involved in trusting relationships. And principals must do all of this without the aid of superpowers.

We wish we could give you *Spidey-sense* or superhuman strength, but instead we offer insights in approaching your work as a school leader. We hope to do what Uncle

Ben did for Peter Parker: provide advice, support, good examples, and opportunities for reflection. Whether you are a new school leader with newly acquired power and responsibility like Peter Parker, or a school leader who has been doing this for a while and wants to reflect on your current practice, this book offers you that opportunity through stories of real practitioners at work and insights from our many years of leading and learning in schools.

This book is written specifically for school leaders, but many of the concepts we address either relate to or can be applied to educational leadership in general. We share our experiences with you through stories and anecdotes that illustrate the leadership considerations we believe are essential in the work of leading schools: *collaboration, shared leadership, evidence-based decision making, and a focus on learning*. We gathered our insights from the schools and districts we have either worked in ourselves, or from those we have consulted with across North America. While we use our experiences to frame the chapters, we also apply our understanding of ideas and research from various thought leaders who helped shape our thinking. We try to keep the focus on leadership practices while weaving in the thinking or research that led us to guide you in a certain direction.

If the concepts we just mentioned—*collaboration, shared leadership, evidence-based decision making, and a focus on learning*—are familiar to you, then it is likely you have committed to enhancing student achievement in your school or district with the Professional Learning Communities at Work[®] (PLC) process. Our work in schools includes on-site “shoulder to shoulder” coaching of collaborative teams and school leaders in addition to providing professional learning opportunities. In order to provide continuous school improvement, teachers and school leaders must stay the course, focusing on the three big ideas of a PLC: (1) a focus on learning, (2) collaboration, and (3) a results orientation. When we are on site as coaches, we work directly with teachers and leaders to ensure that a culture of collaboration is the vehicle used to support student achievement. This is done in the spirit of creating deep understanding of how to use evidence as collaborative teams to meet the needs of students; the model that we have found to be the most effective in doing so is the PLC process.

The PLC Process

The architects of the PLC process, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, describe the PLC process as:

An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 10)

We believe the PLC process represents the most effective way to improve our schools. The success of the PLC concept is now thoroughly evident across the United States, Canada, and throughout the world. In fact, schools and districts continue to provide substantial evidence of their successful implementation and school improvement results by meeting the rigorous criteria to become a model PLC school or district on the All Things PLC website (www.AllThingsPLC.info). As part of the application process, schools and districts must provide evidence that demonstrates a commitment to PLC concepts. Close to two hundred successful applicants have been able to show their success in meeting the following requirements.

- Implementation of PLC concepts for at least three years
- Clear evidence of improved student learning
- Description of school or district culture, practices, and structures that align with the best practices put forth in the PLC at Work literature

In addition, schools and districts that meet the rigorous criteria must update their school or district information on the site each year to show that the data continue to meet the criteria over time.

DuFour and his colleagues (2016) explore in their many volumes of work that PLCs have a fundamental focus on learning. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it.

PLCs also have a collaborative culture. In a PLC, *collaboration* represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school (DuFour et al., 2016).

In PLCs, collaborative teams do collective inquiry into best practice (in both teaching and learning) and current reality. Teams build shared knowledge through collective inquiry to develop new skills and capabilities. As DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) note, “Gradually, this heightened awareness transforms into

fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits which, over time, transform the culture of the school” (p. 12). Members of a PLC should work and learn together.

PLCs are built on a foundation of a shared mission, vision, values, and goals (collective commitments). PLCs are also *action oriented*—team members learn by doing and turn their aspirations into action. They believe being engaged and sharing experiences is the most effective way to learn.

Members of PLCs also commit to *continuous improvement*. Teams constantly search for better ways to fulfill their organization’s vision. Systematic processes within a PLC engage teams in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing those strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 12)

PLCs are learning environments in which learning is constant, and innovation and experimentation flourish. Team members also realize they must assess progress on results rather than intentions—they have a *results orientation*.

The culture in a PLC is simultaneously *loose and tight* (DuFour et al., 2016). This means that some expectations are tight, meaning that schools demand coherence to certain core principles, such as teachers working collaboratively with colleagues to clarify the question, What is it we want our students to learn and be able to do? PLCs are loose in other ways—for example, teachers have autonomy and flexibility with day-to-day instructional implementation.

As DuFour et al. (2016) express, becoming a PLC is a journey, not a destination. The PLC journey is a transformation because it constitutes a complete shift in how educators and school leaders do their everyday business. This book is a resource for those schools and districts that are beginning or are already on their journey to PLC transformation. We hope to help leaders of PLCs reflect on and improve their practices in eight specific areas. It doesn’t matter whether you have been working to create collaboration and implementing the PLC process for a long time or if you are a new administrator ready to embrace this way of working. We want to support

your journey in maximizing collective efficacy and creating shared ownership of student learning.

Eight Areas

In numerology and astrology, the number eight symbolizes abundance, power, harmony, balance, and the ability to make decisions. When you look at the figure eight, notice that the two parts are drawn equally, creating balance. Also, when you turn eight on its side you have the symbol for infinity. As a PLC leader, you have infinite choices to make every day: how to use your time, what to focus on, who to talk to, and where to be. We try to help you sort it all out in the chapters that follow.

As educators and educational consultants, we know there are already many books about school leadership. We appreciate that you chose this book and to join us on this journey. We want this book to help you reflect personally on your practice. In it, we focus the eight chapters on eight areas we believe are most important to our work as leadership coaches and that require PLC leaders to take action.

1. Achieving focus and staying intentional
2. Establishing and maintaining organization
3. Building shared leadership
4. Using evidence for decision making and action
5. Prioritizing the student
6. Leading instruction
7. Fostering communication
8. Developing community and relationships

Achieving Focus and Staying Intentional

During our coaching experiences, we work with leaders who genuinely want to do their best and lead with purpose. Often, we notice that what separates effective leaders from those with ineffective practices is a leader's ability to stay focused on the right work. Distractors, too many initiatives, misuse of time, and an overall inability to determine a small number of goals that intentionally set direction for the school are often missing pieces of leadership practice. In this first of eight areas, we will guide your thinking on how to become more reflective in your intentional focus.

Establishing and Maintaining Organization

Educators, like other professionals for whom collaborative, focused work is the business of the day, need systems and practices in place that make sense and are used by everyone. Creating collaborative cultures of learning requires leaders who can determine necessary organizational practices, consistently model implementation of these practices, and importantly, expect others to do the same. In our experiences, leaders often need support in understanding where to start in creating an organized, safe learning culture and how necessary it is for them to demonstrate consistent application and expectations so there are no mixed messages. In this second area, we support your consideration of what organizational structure you want to create and what you will need to do for deep implementation of consistent practices.

Building Shared Leadership

Leading a school or district does not mean leading alone. Too often in our work with educators, we see strong, focused leaders who attempt to do everything by themselves. PLC leaders develop shared leadership to ensure shared ownership of successful school improvement. Developing opportunities for collaboration through the development of guiding coalitions (school leadership teams) and teacher-led collaborative teams provides increased shared ownership of responsibility. In this third area of focus, we seek to create deeper understanding of the need for shared leadership in a collaborative school and how to involve others in such a model.

Using Evidence for Decision Making and Action

When you think about the word *evidence*, what comes to mind? As an educational leader, do you plan your actions and next steps based on evidence or are you frequently relying on past experiences and the opinions of others? During our coaching work, we sometimes encounter leaders who have gathered evidence from multiple data points, but then their work stops there. They collect data, but do not use the evidence to make decisions and take action. In this fourth area, we consider ways to increase your professional understanding of the important need to rely on the facts and how to use evidence to plan next steps.

Prioritizing the Student

“We put our students first” is a noble statement to make about your school and one that we observe in countless mission and vision statements in our work across North

America. What does it truly look like, however, when the student is the top priority in all of your decisions? What are equitable practices in a school? How do PLCs make daily decisions that reflect an understanding that the student is the center of all the work? In the fifth area, we invite you to consider your student-centeredness and what you can do to increase collaborative efforts to meet the needs of all students.

Leading Instruction

We are often asked what truly changes schools. In each of the sections of this book, we provide you with what we believe is a critical area of importance. Depending on where you are in your leadership journey, there will be topics that resonate more with you than others; however, we strongly recommend that you consider increasing your understanding of the importance of quality instruction in your work to improve your school. When classroom practice improves, we see remarkable increases in student achievement. And when teams understand that the real purpose of their collaboration is to inform instructional practices, great things happen to improve student learning. The sixth area is intended to support your journey to a stronger instructional focus.

Fostering Communication

Despite our very best efforts as leaders, we are not always the best communicators. In our experiences, leaders often know exactly what they want to do next, what they expect, and what the best course of action is, but they neglect one very important practice: effective communication. Unfortunately, we both can say that we have, at times, been ineffective communicators, and we have experienced the negative effects of poor communication, such as a lack of clarity and more seriously, confusion. In this seventh area, we ask you to consider your communication skills—how you listen, what you prioritize, how you communicate your priorities, and how you develop stronger skills so that you understand the needs of others.

Developing Community and Relationships

In this final area, we support your leadership skills as you work beyond your school community and focus on the art of building relationships. We know that, as a leader, there is much to do every day. We also recognize that by the time you get to this final area, you will already have ideas about where to start focusing your actions as a leader. Please do not think that this is the last section because it is the