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## Clarity Precedes Competence

*Marcus Buckingham (2005) advises that the one thing leaders of any organization must know to be effective is the importance of clarity. Well-intentioned people will be unable to implement the PLC process unless they have a deep, shared understanding of the conditions they are attempting to create, the ideas that should drive their work, and the obstacles they are likely to encounter as they move forward. In this chapter, we address these issues in an initial attempt to establish greater clarity about what the PLC process encompasses. We argue that every person in the system has an opportunity and an obligation to contribute to systemic PLCs.*

It is complicated enough to implement the PLC process when administrators and staff throughout the system are very clear on what the process entails and its implications. It is impossible to implement the process when, as is so often the case, people are not clear on the most basic element: what does the term *professional learning community* mean? Many staff members and leaders use the term ambiguously and do none of the things that members of a PLC actually do. We need to begin, then, by clarifying the characteristics of a PLC, the underlying assumptions that drive the process, the challenges of implementation, and the need for individuals at all levels of the organization to contribute to the process.

## What Is a Professional Learning Community?

One of the first challenges in using the PLC process systemically is establishing clarity across the system regarding what it means to be a PLC and what is involved in the process of becoming and sustaining a PLC. There are six characteristics of high-performing PLCs as described by Rick and his colleagues Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Tom Many (2010):

1. Shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitments), and goals (indicators, timelines, and targets), which are all focused on student learning
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Action orientation or “learning by doing”
5. A commitment to continuous improvement
6. A results orientation

Underpinning these six qualities are three big ideas, or assumptions, that serve as the core of the PLC process. These ideas help focus educators as they make the transition from traditional schools to PLCs:

1. **A relentless focus on learning for all students**—The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure all students learn at high levels; the future success of students will depend to a great extent on how effective educators are in achieving that fundamental purpose. There must be no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Educators must embrace this purpose and act in ways that demonstrate their commitment to it. Schools must also examine all existing practices, procedures, and policies in light of that fundamental purpose and ensure they align with and reinforce high levels of learning for all students. A corollary assumption stipulates that if all students are to learn at high levels, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.
2. **A collaborative culture and collective effort to support student and adult learning**—Schools cannot achieve the fundamental purpose of learning for all if educators work in isolation. Therefore, educators

must build a collaborative culture in which they work together interdependently and assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students. Working in teams, they will be empowered to make important decisions, support one another, and learn from one another as they engage in the hard work of changing a culture.

3. **A results orientation to improve practice and drive continuous improvement**—Schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success. Therefore, educators must systematically monitor student learning on an ongoing basis and use evidence of student learning to respond immediately to students who experience difficulty. Teachers and principals must also use this evidence of student learning to inform individual and collective professional practice and to fuel continuous improvement.

In a PLC, four critical questions help educators focus relentlessly on learning for all students:

1. What is it we want our students to learn? What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do we expect them to acquire as a result of this course, this grade level, and this unit of instruction?
2. How will we know if each student is learning each of the skills, concepts, and dispositions we have deemed most essential?
3. How will we respond when some of our students do not learn? What process will we put in place to ensure students receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, precise, diagnostic, directive, and systematic?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

In addressing these questions, educators go beyond pooling opinions, sharing personal anecdotes, or citing past precedents. They engage in exactly what the PLC process calls for: *learning* together. Together they study curriculum frameworks and attempt to translate them into the specific knowledge and skills students must acquire for each unit of instruction. Together they make decisions regarding recommended pacing for those units, and individually they make decisions about the instructional strategies they feel will be most effective

in their classrooms. Together they examine effective ways of assessing student learning in the classroom each day as well as through team-developed common formative and summative assessments. Together they analyze the evidence of student learning and search for ways to improve their practice. Together they explore strategies to enrich and extend the learning for students who have demonstrated they are highly proficient. As a school, they develop a coordinated plan of support when students experience difficulty to avoid subjecting them to the traditional educational lottery in which the response to a struggling student has been solely dependent on the individual teacher to whom he or she had been assigned.

The specifics of all this work are grounded in a solid foundation of common purpose, shared vision, collective commitments, and goals that shape the culture of the school and district. There is general agreement that the purpose of the school and district is to ensure all students learn at high levels. There is a shared vision of the school and district that educators are attempting to create in order to better fulfill that purpose. Individuals throughout the school and district articulate collective commitments regarding the actions they will take and behaviors they will exhibit in order to achieve the shared vision. A few clearly defined goals help them mark their progress in this process of continuous improvement.

The shared vision and specific commitments may exist on paper at the beginning of the process; however, they are not part of the collective mindset from the outset of a PLC process. Rather, the process itself cultivates and deepens the sense of common purpose, mutual accountability, and collective efficacy of the group to achieve results never before attained.

## What Can Go Wrong?

In a word, plenty! There are at least four big barriers that stand in the way of bringing the PLC process to life in ways that allow an entire system to experience the full power of the process. First, there is a growing sense of urgency about the need for education reform. This makes people vulnerable to quick fixes. Because people see PLCs as proven (evidence shows that it works), and because it sounds attractive, they tend to adopt it as a *program solution*. The problem is that it cannot work as a program. If treated as a program, it becomes “just the latest innovation” to be replaced sooner rather than later by the next attractive innovation to come along. PLCs are about people, practices, and processes—they are not a program. They are fundamentally a change in culture—the way we do work around here.

Second, people fail to grasp the meaning of PLCs on a deep operational level. It is one thing to read and like the three big ideas, but another matter altogether to truly understand what the process looks like in action. The three big ideas and six characteristics are sophisticated concepts that take a while to master. People at all levels of an organization often underestimate what is needed to establish strong PLC processes.

Third, because of a failure to comprehend the deeper cultural meaning of PLCs, people do not attend to the necessary conditions within the infrastructure that allow PLCs to spread and be sustained throughout the system. Traditional assumptions must be reconsidered. New ways of working together must be embraced. Specific actionable steps must be established to clarify how the ideas that drive the PLC process will be brought to life at all levels of the system. PLCs have to be treated as a change in culture if they are to have a strong and lasting impact, not only in schools, but in the system as a whole. In short, PLCs must become systemic if they are to be of lasting value that goes beyond improving isolated schools.

Fourth, as long as people see PLCs as the latest program, they can never figure out how PLCs fit with the myriad of other programs that come and go. If PLCs are just a program, they will be supplanted by the next attractive initiative that comes along, and even if they do persist in some form, they will be marginalized as one among many initiatives. School reform efforts will continue to represent random acts of innovation rather than a coordinated, sustained approach to help develop the capacity of educators to meet the challenges of today and the as-yet-unknown challenges of the future. With this piecemeal approach, schools can never achieve coherence. Unconnected fragments confuse people and result in fatigue as reformers try to juggle competing forces of change.

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## The Time Is Now

Our goal in this book is to show leaders how to overcome these barriers to make PLCs systemic and therefore a driving force in helping all students to achieve at higher levels while also increasing educators' sense of fulfillment and excitement with their profession. The timing for systemic PLCs could not be more propitious as major developments in pedagogy and technology are beginning to converge. As Michael (Fullan, 2012) explains in his book *Stratosphere*, technology, pedagogy, and change knowledge must come together to create

dynamic new learning environments that are both wider and deeper. The solutions must meet four learning criteria. They must be:

1. **Irresistibly engaging for both students and teachers**—As we have already noted, studies have shown that schooling has become increasingly boring for students as they proceed through the grades. This push away from school engagement is accompanied by the pull of the ever-seductive digital world. Thus, the solutions for creating new learning environments will have to be engaging for both students and teachers.
2. **Elegantly easy to use**—Learning experiences within the new environments must be easily accessible for students and teachers.
3. **Technologically ubiquitous 24/7**—Learning within school and outside of school needs to be coordinated to expand the “learning clock” for students.
4. **Steeped in real-life problems**—Deep learning requires that students study real-life problems as they increasingly come to understand the world they live in, how to prevent it from deteriorating, and how to improve it.

As these four criteria suggest, we anticipate a radically new learning environment in the near future. The PLC process and culture are precisely what will be required to be proactive in the face of these inevitable demands. PLCs are innovative in their own right, but by definition they generate content innovations on an ongoing basis that deepen learning.

## You Are the System

*Systemness*—the degree to which people identify and are committed to an entity larger than themselves—is not about letting others work to get the system right so that you will be better off. It is about everyone doing their part in two aspects: being as good as one can be during individual and collaborative work, and being aware that everyone needs to make a contribution to improving the larger system. Systemness should not be an abstract concept. When school principals, for example, are deeply engaged in work with other schools and with district leaders, they experience greater commitment to the success of the whole district. In a systemic PLC, there should be no clear distinction between the system and the individual. Members of a PLC *are* the system individuals seek to create.

So, systemness involves all the key components of PLCs that we have identified in this chapter, and it is also about the identity that people create with one another as they pursue together deep mutual learning goals. In pursuing these goals, people throughout the system—administrators, teachers, and stakeholders—must address some challenges and issues that are vital to changing the culture:

- Establishing coherence and clarity regarding purpose and priorities throughout the organization
- Building shared knowledge about the rationale for change
- Engaging in meaningful two-way dialogue throughout the change process
- Identifying the specific steps that must be taken immediately to make progress toward long-term aspirational goals
- Creating a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight
- Building collective capacity around the agenda of improving student achievement
- Demonstrating reciprocal accountability by providing the resources and support to help people succeed at what they are being asked to do
- Establishing ongoing feedback loops that help people assess the impact of their efforts and make adjustments accordingly
- Ensuring transparency of results, and using results to inform and improve practice
- Creating a collaborative culture in which people take collective responsibility for the success of the initiative
- Establishing trust
- Developing lots of leaders
- Fostering self-efficacy
- Maintaining focus and limiting initiatives
- Managing resistance
- Sustaining the improvement process—even when key leaders have left the organization
- Celebrating small wins

These are the formidable tasks that confront state, provincial, and district leaders as they attempt to make PLCs systemic. But these same tasks apply to every building-level leader, union leader, and team leader. Furthermore, we want to stress that classroom teachers must address virtually all of these issues as they work with their colleagues and students because “every great teacher is leading” (Gardner, 1993). So, as we reference system leaders throughout this book, readers should be able to substitute the word *principal, union president, department chair, team leader, or teacher* and still find the message to be relevant.



We subscribe to the theory that effective communication requires repetition to the point of redundancy. We will repeat central ideas throughout this book and don’t apologize for doing so. Therefore, in concluding this chapter, we reiterate, if the PLC process is to become the driving force in systemic reform of education, it is imperative that conditions are created to help people throughout the system:

- Develop a clear understanding of the underlying principles of the process and its implications for action
- Accept personal responsibility for contributing to the collective effort to implement the process
- Work with others to tackle the challenging issues inherent in the process
- Recognize that the right time to do the right thing is always right now

Clarity is a process as well as a state. The clearer you get, the more you seek skills to make progress; the more skilled you get, the clearer you and others become regarding the principles of the process—a virtuous circle, to be sure. In chapter 2, we build on this virtuous circle by offering more specific advice on how leaders can enhance coherence and clarity throughout the system.