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The Five Disciplines *of* PLC Leaders



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Choose to Be an Inequity Eraser

Until recently, there has been a mystifying silence in the PLC leadership literature about how the discipline of service and sharing—hallmark qualities of all teachers and leaders in a professional learning community—serves as an inequity eraser for the social injustices caused by isolated decision making and the resultant wide variance in student learning experiences.

~~Decisions made in isolation as a result of teacher learning team dysfunction affect the rigor of daily classroom tasks, decision choices, ongoing rigor for assessment task selection, and instructional lesson design practices.~~ These noncollaborative decisions are primary contributors to this variance. Inequities can be seen throughout the K–12 curriculum teaching and learning experience, unfortunately. At least six areas of inequity are created by the failure of grade-level and course-based faculty teams to work together within a serving and sharing culture. As PLC leaders, it is our task to attack these inequities with passion and persistence.

1. **Access inequity.** This inequity is seen in who gets access into the school's various academic programs once tracking begins in fifth grade and beyond. Most kids are locked into a permanent track as early as sixth and seventh grade. How is it decided who gets into and out of a level or track?
2. **Task selection inequity.** The selection and rigor of daily tasks and experiences performed by students each day in class reveals inequities in the quality of lesson planning from teacher to teacher.
3. **Formative assessment inequity.** Task selection and level of rigor of daily in class prompts and tasks used by teachers to assess student understanding also vary, as do rigor and task selection for homework assignments, rules for make-up work, and the depth and quality of teacher feedback on formative work.
4. **Summative assessment inequity.** Inequities can emerge in the rigor in task selection that teachers or teacher teams use for unit tests and quizzes. How do you, as the school leader, define high-quality assessments for each academic discipline, grade level, or course? How high is your tolerance level for tests and exams that either do not meet the prescribed standards or vary widely in task rigor from teacher to teacher of the same course or grade level?
5. **Grading inequity.** The grading of all assessments, formative learning, and effective feedback loops is one of the areas of greatest inequity. Assessment tasks must be discussed and agreed upon by all team members to arrive at an implementation of common practice.

6. **RTI inequity.** How variant, swift, and complete is the intentional and collective team response to instruction and intervention on all aspect of the academic programs you lead? How well do your responses demonstrate evidence that both students and teachers are becoming reflective learners?

When you become skilled at exercising the discipline of service and sharing to resolve these inequities, you enable your N-S-E-W relationships to make the critical move from a being a “working group” to becoming an interdependent team. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) call this the “critical choice.” The distinction between a working group and a true team is as follows: “A working group relies primarily on the individual contributions of its members for group performance, whereas a team strives for a magnified impact that is incremental to what its members could achieve in their individual roles” (p. 88). Teams attack the inequities and seek out “magnified impact” that is far greater than any individual could ever achieve.

As a school leader, you need *magnified impact*. You *need teams*. You need your teams to be the smallest unit of change in the school or program. Your students need highly effective faculty grade-level or course-based teams that work diligently to erase the inequities created by the widely variant judgments that occur when teacher and administrators work in isolation or simple groups. Again, how do teams differ from working groups? *Team* members are willing to relate and rely on each another. More wisdom from Katzenbach and Smith (1993):

[Teams] require both individual and mutual accountability. Teams rely on more than group discussion, debate, and decision; on more than sharing information and best practice perspectives; on more than a mutual reinforcing of performance standards. Without discrete team work-products produced through the joint, real contributions of team members, the promise of incremental or magnified performance impact goes untapped. (p. 90)

A team promises greater performance than a working group, but it also brings more risk. Becoming a team demands a leap of faith. Rugged individualists—and there are many, especially at the top—often instinctively believe in the adage “if you want a job done right, do it yourself.” It is against their nature to rely on others. But you cannot contribute to real team performance without taking responsibility for your peers *and* letting your peers assume genuine responsibility for your actions.

Not taking the leap of faith to become a team has a high price in terms of the group’s effectiveness. So does “faking” the leap of faith by participating in the team discussions, and then doing what you want regardless of the team decisions. If the team approach fails, “members do get diverted from their individual goals,

work-products do not add significant value, costs do outweigh benefits, and people do resent the imposition on their time and priorities" (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 90).

Here's the point. Your leadership within the professional learning community—your ability to model service and sharing in yourself and then develop N-S-E-W leadership in others—will accomplish two great things. First, you will remove any barriers to participation in community. Second, you will open the doors to transparency and collective inspection of ideas and actions that create the six great inequities. To that end, you must be steadfast in the teaching of sharing as an organizational value. In the words of John Gardner (1988):

As for leaders, their task is more demanding. They must not only have their own commitments, they must move the rest of us toward commitment. They call us to the sacrifices necessary to achieve our goals. They do not ask more than the community can give, but often ask more than it intended to give or thought it was possible to give. (p. 7)

Service and sacrifice. Meaningful relationships. Giving more than you thought you could give, but not too much. Personal humility and professional will. This is your leadership, your life, your serving and sharing legacy. You stretch those in your N-S-E-W sphere, but not so far you lose them. Doing this discipline well is both an art and a science. You train to get better at it, and you learn to get better through the lessons of each relational experience.

Accept Others

One last caution: your growth in the discipline of service and sharing may not be fully realized if you limit your passion to passion for reaching student achievement goals. Your leadership life needs to be about so much more than just reaching those goals. It is about serving all those in your N-S-E-W sphere, including and especially yourself, in such a way that you and they reach their full leadership potential. Nothing else is good enough. The mark of great leaders is evidence that they achieved their full potential and helped others to do so as well. Did you support *and* encourage others to reach their full potential—every person, every adult in your N-S-E-W sphere, every single one? Robert Greenleaf hints at this leadership call to greatness:

The interest and affection the leader has for his [or her] followers—and it is a mark of true greatness when it is genuine—is clearly something that the followers "haven't to deserve." I have known some great leaders; it has been my privilege to work for a few. Some, not all, had gruff, demanding, uncompromising exteriors, but deep down, inside all those I think as a great—no exceptions—was a thoroughly feminine aspect, reflected in their unqualified attitude of acceptance of

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Recent Studies Citing Professional Learning Communities as the Key to Improved Student Achievement

“Time and again we see the power of collective capacity. When the group is mobilized with focus and specificity, it can accomplish amazing results.... The collaborative, sometimes known as professional learning communities, gets these results because not only are leaders being influential, but peers are supporting and pressuring each other to do better.”

—Fullan, 2011, p. 9

“Here we emphasize the importance of professional community, largely because accumulating evidence shows that it is related to improved instruction, student achievement, and one of our leadership variables (shared leadership).... Findings from several studies cited above suggest that when the professional community focuses on the quality of student learning, teachers adopt instructional practices that enhance students’ learning.”

—Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 42

“School systems around the world that move from great to excellent facilitate school-based learning communities to create peer-led support and accountability to each other.”

—Mourshed, Chijirole, & Barber, 2010, p. 51

“High-quality professional development in the context of a supportive professional community and where teachers are oriented toward improvement appears powerfully related to gains in academic productivity.”

—Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010, p. 113

“The implications of these findings are powerful. In particular, we suggest that translating student data into student achievement requires a strong learning community.”

—Christman, et al., 2009

“Findings from many studies suggest that participation in a professional community with one’s colleagues is an integral part of professional learning that impacts positively on students...if teachers are to change, they need to participate in a professional learning community that is focused on becoming responsive to students.”

—Timperley, 2008

The collective results of these eleven studies suggest that well-developed PLCs have a positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement. A collaborative focus on student learning is the key to increased achievement.

(Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 80)

“Pupil learning was the foremost concern of people working in PLCs and, the more developed a PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with two key measures of effectiveness—pupil achievement and professional learning.”

—Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005, p. 146

“The greater the extent of reported staff involvement in professional and pupil learning, the higher was the level of pupil performance and progress in both primary and secondary schools.”

—Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005, p. 132

The Case for a Guaranteed Curriculum

One of the most significant factors that impacts student achievement is that teachers commit to implementing a *guaranteed and viable curriculum* to ensure no matter who teaches a given class, the curriculum will address certain essential content. For learning to be effective, clear targets in terms of information and skills must be established.”

—Marzano, 2003

To improve student achievement, educators must determine the *power standards*—learning standards that are most essential because they possess the qualities of endurance, leverage, and readiness for success at the next level. The first and most important practical implication of power standards is that leaders must make time for teachers to collaborate within and among grade levels to identify the power standards.”

—Reeves, 2002

One of the keys to improving schools is to ensure teachers know the *learning intentions* and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all their students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students’ current knowledge and the success criteria. This can be maximized in a safe and collaborative environment where teachers talk to each other about teaching.”

—Hattie, 2009

The staff in the effective school accepts responsibility for the students’ learning of *essential curricular goals*.” [emphasis added]

—Lezotte, 2001, p. 4

Professional learning communities are characterized by an academic focus that begins with a set of practices that bring clarity, coherence, and precision to every teacher’s classroom work. Teachers work collaboratively to provide a *rigorous curriculum that is crystal clear and includes a compact list of learning expectations* for each grade or course and tangible exemplars of student proficiency for each learning expectation.”

—Saphier, 2005

Effective teachers *clarify goals and assessment criteria* in ways that will help students understand what they need to learn and the strategies likely to be most useful in enabling them to learn.”

—Brophy, 2004

Implementing a strategy of *common, rigorous standards* with differentiated resources and instruction can create excellence and equity for all students.”

—Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009

The Case for Teams

“Empowered teams are such a powerful force of integration and productivity that they form the basic building block of any intelligent organization.”

—Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993, p. 66

“We are at a point in time where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done. . . . Working in teams is the norm in a learning organization.”

—Senge, et al., 1994, pp. 354–355

“The leader of the future will master the art of forming teams. . . . Future leaders will master teamwork, working with and through others because no one person can master all the sources of information to make good decisions.”

—Ulrich, 1996, p. 213

“Teams bring together complementary skills and experience that exceed those of any individual on the team. Teams are more effective in problem solving, provide a social dimension that enhances work, motivate, and foster peer pressure and internal accountability.”

—Katzenbach & Smith, 1994

“The best way to achieve challenging goals is through teamwork. Teams nurture, support, and inspire each other.”

—Tichy, 1997

People who collaborate learn from each other and create synergy. That is why learning organizations are made up of teams that share a common purpose.

(Handy, 1995)

The chance to be a part of a winning team is a powerful motivator. . . .
Confidence blossoms when people feel connected rather than isolated, when they
are willing to engage and commit to one another, when they can act together to
solve problems and produce results Bonds grow from working together on
real and important tasks that achieve success.”

—Kanter, 2006, p. 335

We have known for nearly a quarter of a century that self-managed teams are far
more productive than any other form of organizing. . . . By joining with others we
can accomplish something important that we could not accomplish alone.”

—Wheatley, 1999, pp. 152–153

A team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to
enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone. . . . They have
become the vehicle for moving organizations into the future. . . . Teams are not
just nice to have. They are hard-core units of the production.”

—Blanchard, 2007, p. 17

Influencers increase the capacity of others by asking them to work in teams with
interdependent relationships. . . . We increase capacity when we work together
rather than in isolation.”

—Patterson et al., 2008, p. 183

The Case for Collaboration

“The single most important factor for successful school restructuring and the first order of business for those interested in increasing the capacity of their schools is building a collaborative internal environment.”

—Eastwood & Seashore Louis, 1992

“When groups, rather than individuals, are seen as the main units for implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they facilitate development of shared purpose for student learning and collective responsibility to achieve it.”

—Newmann & Wehlage, 1995

“The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers.”

—National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003, p. 7

“Teacher collaboration in strong professional learning communities improves the quality and equity of student learning, promotes discussions that are grounded in evidence and analysis rather than opinion, and fosters collective responsibility for student success.”

—McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006

“Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any one of them can achieve alone”

—Carroll, 2009, p.13

When teachers work in collaborative teams, schools are more likely to see gains in student achievement, find higher quality solutions to problems, promote increased confidence among staff, create an environment in which teachers support one another's strengths and accommodate weaknesses, provide support for new teachers, and provide all staff with access to an expanded pool of ideas, materials, and methods.

(Little, 1990)

"[High-achieving schools] build a highly collaborative school environment where working together to solve problems and to learn from each other become cultural norms."

—WestEd, 2000, p.12

"Improving schools require collaborative cultures....Without collaborative skills and relationships, it is not possible to continue to learn."

—Fullan, 1993

"Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others, the prospect of truly improving schools is not likely."

—Schlechty, 2005, p. 22

"It is imperative that professional learning be directed at improving the quality of collaborative work."

—National Staff Development Council, 2001

"It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms. Today's teachers must transform their personal knowledge into a collectively built, widely shared, and cohesive professional knowledge base."

—Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005

The Case for a Guaranteed Curriculum

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The Case for Formative Assessment to Improve Student Learning

Effective use of formative assessment, developed through teacher learning communities, promises not only the largest potential gains in student achievement but also a process for affordable teacher professional development.

(William & Thompson, 2006)

There is strong and rigorous evidence that improving formative assessment can raise standards of pupils' performance. There have been few initiatives in education with such a strong body of evidence to support a claim to raise standards."

—Black & William, 1998, p. 20

Assessment for learning, . . . when done well, this is one of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning that we know of. Educators *collectively* at the district and school levels become more skilled and focused at assessing, disaggregating, and using student achievement as a tool for ongoing improvement."

—Fullan, 2005, p. 71

Studies have demonstrated assessment *for* learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of assessment particularly benefits low-achieving students."

—Stiggins, 2004, p. 27

Formative assessments are one of the most powerful weapons in a teacher's arsenal. An effective standards-based, formative assessment program can help to dramatically enhance student achievement throughout the K–12 system."

—Marzano, 2006 (back cover)

Formative assessment is a potentially transformative instructional tool that, if early understood and adroitly employed, can benefit both educators and their students [p. 3]. . . . Formative assessment constitutes the key cornerstone of learner-headed instructional thinking. Formative assessment represents *evidence-based* instructional decision making. If you want to become more instructionally effective and if you want your students to achieve more, then formative assessments should be for you [p. 15]." —Popham, 2008

In the schools we studied that doubled student achievement, collaborative teams of teachers used large portions of their collaborative discussions on formative benchmark assessments."

—Odden and Archibald, 2009

Data Analysis Protocol

Team _____ Teacher _____ Date _____

This analysis is based on our team's common assessment of the following essential learnings.

1. Which of our students need additional time and support to achieve at or above proficiency on an essential learning?

How will we provide that time and support?

2. What is our plan to enrich and extend the learning for students who are highly proficient?

3. What is an area where my students struggled?

What strategies were used by teammates whose students performed well?

4. What is an area where our teams' students struggled?

What do we believe is the cause?

What is our plan for improving the results?

The Case for Common Assessments

“In my reviews of accountability data from hundreds of schools, the schools with the greatest gains in achievement consistently happen to use common assessments and collaborative scoring by faculty.”

—Reeves, 2007

“Powerful, proven structures for improved results are at hand. It starts when a group of teachers meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, and then share and create lessons and strategies to improve upon those levels.”

—Schmoker, 2004

“Common formative assessments provide regular and timely feedback regarding student attainment of the most critical standards, (and) also foster consistent expectations and priorities within a grade level, course, and department regarding standards, instruction, and assessment. . . . Most importantly, common formative assessment results enable educators to diagnose student learning needs accurately *in time to make instructional modifications.*”

—Ainsworth, 2007, pp. 95–96

The schools and districts that doubled student achievement added another layer of testing—common formative or benchmark assessments. These assessments were designed to provide detailed and concrete information on what students knew and do not know with respect to specific learning targets. Educators focused their collaborative discussions on the formative benchmark assessment data to determine collectively how to craft instructional units to help students learn objectives for particular units. Effectiveness of instruction was transparent and the subject of public and professional conversations and the focus of ongoing professional development.

(Odden & Archibald, 2009)

... to improved student achievement was moving beyond an individual looking at his or her classroom data. Instead, it took getting same-grade teams to meet, analyze the results of each interim assessment to and what concepts in the curriculum were posing difficulty for students, ideas, figure out the best interventions, and actually follow up in their plans.

(Christman, et al., 2009)

... the extent that we team to 1) analyze, understand and deconstruct standards, transform them into high quality classroom assessments, and 3) share and synthesize results together, we benefit from the union of our wisdom about how to ensure our students continue to grow as learners.”

—Stiggins, 2005, p. 82

... schools we studied did not experience dramatic gains in student achievement. Teams of teachers began to focus on evidence of student learning from formative assessments and using evidence of that student learning to evaluate instruction.”

—Gallimore, et al., 2009