A CHANGE FROM WITHIN
NOW WHAT?

THE FIRST 6 STEPS OF IMPLEMENTING A PLC

By Chris Hansen

Going back to school after a summer PLC institute can be both exciting and overwhelming. Two and a half days of commonsense, research-based, world-class education presentations will do that to you. If you thought more than a few times, “Yeah, why aren't we doing that?” you are like the rest of us. PLCs offer educators a variety of ideas and resources to help schools or districts focus the work on higher levels of learning for all. Who wouldn't be excited about that? You’ll likely want to jump right in, but your excitement will carry you only so far. To make the most of your initial PLC implementation, follow these next steps.
**STEP 1: Build a Guiding Coalition**

If you are an administrator, you first need to build a guiding coalition. A guiding coalition is an alliance of key members of an organization who are specifically charged to lead a change process through the predictable turmoil. Members of the coalition should learn together, have shared objectives, and share high levels of trust. Harvard professor John Kotter (2012) says that an effective guiding coalition requires:

1. **Position power**—Are enough key players on board, especially the mainline managers, so that those left out cannot easily block progress?
2. **Expertise**—Are the various points of view—in terms of discipline, work experience, nationality, etc.—relevant to the task at hand adequately represented so that informed, intelligent decisions will be made?
3. **Credibility**—Does the group have enough people with good reputations in the firm so that its pronouncements will be taken seriously by other employees?
4. **Leadership**—Does the group include enough proven leaders to be able to drive the change process? (p. 59)

Building a guiding coalition looks different in each school or district. I recommend the blog post “Who Is Steering Your School’s Bus?” by Austin Buffum (2012), which contains references to the works of Derek Sivers and John Kotter, to help you get started.

**STEP 2: Use Ideas to Make Cultural Change**

The words *learning by doing* are not just a fabulous book title by the paragons of our industry (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). In short, learning by doing means that we engage in action research in our own district. We commit to actions, not words. We cannot make change in our nation's schools by philosophizing, but rather, we must use a vast research base to make structural, pedagogical, and, most important, cultural change.

PLC ideas are not new or bleeding edge. There is general consensus that this work is our best chance to make systemic and substantive change. Yet, when you work with ideas that run counter to existing culture, this can create equal amounts of tension and excitement. Focus your ideas on the possibilities, on the students' lives you will alter for the better, and on the pride and sense of accomplishment you will feel for doing the right work at the right time.

You will have to teach the staff the central ideas of a PLC and start building a common language around the critical questions of the work (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009):

1. What specifically do we expect all students to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when students are having difficulty learning?
4. How will we respond when students demonstrate that they have learned?

Here's an idea, have fun doing it. Take each of the four critical questions and wrap them up as a present in a separate box. Tell the staff they are gifts for the learners in your school. Then draw names or choose staff members to unwrap them so that you can teach the ideas of guaranteed and viable curriculum, collaborative common assessment, responding to students who need help, and responding to students who need enrichment. Put a prize in each box like chocolate, a new book, a certificate for the principal to sub for the teacher, or balloons. The key idea here is to have fun while creating a common language.

Another way to communicate the expectations of a PLC is to use a continuum to survey the staff. The book *Learning by Doing* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016) is an invaluable tool for implementation, and each chapter has a section titled “Assessing Your Place in the PLC Journey” with a continuum of learning. Start with the Communicating Effectively continuum shown here (page 32). The tool allows staff members to see indicators of successful PLC implementation and rate their school's implementation as preinitiating, initiating, implementing, developing, or sustaining. This assessment serves two purposes. First, it allows you to measure the teachers' perceptions of where they are on the journey. Second, giving staff the PLC continuum annually is an avenue to put a clear example of what the right work looks like into their hands. Too often, the excitement of "the conference my principal went to" turns into a compliance checklist rather than the cultural journey that a true PLC
The Professional Learning Communities at Work™ Continuum: Communicating Effectively

**DIRECTIONS:** Individually, silently, and honestly assess the current reality of your school's implementation of each indicator listed in the left column. Consider what evidence or anecdotes support your assessment. This form may also be used to assess district or team implementation.

We understand the purpose and priorities of our school because they have been communicated consistently and effectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Preinitiating</th>
<th>Initiating</th>
<th>Implementing</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Sustaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school has established a clear purpose and priorities that have been effectively communicated. Systems are in place to ensure action steps aligned with the purpose and priorities are implemented and monitored.</td>
<td>There is no sense of purpose or priorities. People throughout the school feel swamped by what they regard as a never-ending series of fragmented, disjointed, and short-lived improvement initiatives. Changes in leadership inevitably result in changes in direction.</td>
<td>Key leaders may have reached agreement on general purpose and priorities, but people throughout the organization remain unclear. Furthermore, if asked to explain the priorities of the school or the strategies to achieve those priorities, leaders would have difficulty articulating specifics. Staff members would offer very different answers if pressed to explain the priorities of the school.</td>
<td>There is general understanding of the purpose and priorities of the school, but many staff members have not embraced them. Specific steps are being taken to advance the priorities, but some staff members are participating only grudgingly. They view the initiative as interfering with their real work.</td>
<td>Structures and processes have been altered to align with the purpose and priorities. Staff members are beginning to see benefits from the initiative and are seeking ways to become more effective in implementing it.</td>
<td>There is almost universal understanding of the purpose and priorities of the school. All policies, procedures, and structures have been purposefully aligned with the effort to fulfill the purpose and accomplish the priorities. Systems have been created to gauge progress. The systems are carefully monitored, and the resulting information is used to make adjustments designed to build the collective capacity of the group to be successful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The leaders in the school communicate purpose and priorities through modeling, allocation of resources, what they celebrate, and what they are willing to confront.

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is no sense of purpose or priorities. Different people in the school seem to have different pet projects, and there is considerable in-fighting to acquire the resources to support those different projects.</td>
<td>Leaders can articulate the purpose and priorities of the school with a consistent voice, but their behavior is not congruent with their words. The structures, resources, and rewards of the school have not been altered to align with the professed priorities.</td>
<td>The school has begun to alter the structures, resources, and rewards to better align with the stated priorities. Staff members who openly oppose the initiative may be confronted, but those confronting them are likely to explain they are doing someone else’s bidding. For example, a principal may say, “The central office is concerned that you are overtly resisting the process we are attempting to implement.”</td>
<td>People throughout the school are changing their behavior to align with the priorities. They are seeking new strategies for using resources more effectively to support the initiative and are willing to reallocate time, money, materials, and people in order to move forward. Small improvements are recognized and celebrated. Leaders confront incongruent behavior.</td>
<td>The purpose and priorities of the school are evident by the everyday behavior of people throughout the school. Time, money, materials, people, and resources have been strategically allocated to reflect priorities. Processes are in place to recognize and celebrate commitment to the priorities. People throughout the school will confront those who disregard the priorities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
promises. This is not a matter of “what we do,” but rather “who we are.”

You also might ask various stakeholders to read a book. There are many that will fit the bill, such as Learning by Doing (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016), Starting a Movement (Williams & Hierck, 2015), and/or the seminal work Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). A parent, school board member, teacher, principal, or food service employee can and will change your entire district if you give him or her the ideas to be excited about. The point here is to start with the excitement of learning and then carefully fan the flames while doing.

### STEP 3: Generate Team Norms

Let’s be honest about collaboration; at times, it can be a challenge. Human beings are wildly different in values, work ethics, and criteria for success. And some team meetings highlight the fact that hardworking professional educators have differing priority lists. Creating team norms is all about laying the groundwork for effective, efficient, and results-based collaboration. Becky DuFour describes it this way: “In PLCs, norms represent the protocols and commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals” (allthingsplc.info). Simply put, they are the commitments you make to each other to ensure your team is high performing and focused.

Examples of quality team norms are readily available, and there is no shame in using norms that have made other teams work. A norm such as “We commit to keeping issues within the team and not sandbag a colleague” sets a tone and expectation. Norms that send the
message that collective efficacy is present and required matter when you are tackling the serious work of ensuring that all students learn.

The administration team, front offices, business offices, and any other team you expect to collaborate should have team norms. It signals to all in the district or school that you expect a culture of learning. I highly recommend you revisit team norms midyear and ensure that the team norming activity becomes a model for the district. One final word on norms: make them real and have conversations about what happens when a norm is not followed. It is deflating to your culture to have a simple norm repeatedly broken. You do not do deflating; you do energizing.

**STEP 4: Generate SMART Goals**

In the fall of that first year, consider writing one meaningful SMART (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) goal, but take care to make this goal meaningful. Do not generate a goal on what is most easily measurable but rather on what is going to have the greatest impact on student achievement. Ask teams to consider the following questions: What standards do students most struggle with during the year? How are we measuring that work? What instructional strategies might we change to get better results? After answering those questions, they can write the SMART goal, being certain to abide by the tenets of the SMART acronym. It is wise to have a focused goal that is attainable; this gives you an opportunity to give real feedback to teachers about adjustments or celebrations.

SMART goals that focus on standards really lead you to begin the work of identifying power or essential or priority standards. Introducing this concept to staff will ignite many years of good work.

**STEP 5: Begin Identifying Power Standards**

Doug Reeves and Larry Ainsworth described the concept of power standards many years ago, but I like Rick DuFour’s definition best: power standards “are the critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions all students are to acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 93).

Key ideas and concepts are just far too important and must be prioritized. For example, in the modern world, who wouldn’t want the following key seventh-grade speaking and listening standard prioritized?

This is a key life skill that students will use in all content areas, in national standardized assessments, and, most important, in real life. This is a power standard.

“Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.”

In short, what you are doing is starting to work on the first critical question, creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum by defining what you want students to know and be able to do. In future years, you can polish and refine questions two through four, but in this first year, it is important to begin to create a dialogue around this question.
STEP 6: Celebrate and Repeat

Next, plan carefully to say the words, "You did a great job on this!" Celebrate simple successes for anything that gets the ball rolling. This is an activity that all staff can execute without much ado. The recommendation here is to build a culture of learners in your teams.

For example, build time in your schedules to ensure collaboration. Remember, isolation is the enemy of a collaborative culture, so if possible, leave no teacher on an island. The entirely free and very helpful allthingsplc.info provides ideas and sample schedules to help you accomplish this. Within the first month of school, give the teams a task that you know will be accomplished easily. I recommend team norming. With a short video, some basic instruction, some good examples, and enthusiasm for being a PLC, teams can create a list of team norms to turn in within a meeting or two at most. Then you celebrate that accomplishment. At a staff meeting or in some creative way, tell the staff they rocked team norms. The norms might not be perfect and with time they will improve, but you have shown the staff that they can organize into teams and agree on how to learn together.

The First Year

If by the end of the first year you have built a guiding coalition, generated team norms and have meaningful SMART goals created, you will have had a great year of learning by doing. You want to create a repeatable experience in the coming years, set expectations that will guide staff members in the future, and continue to build collective efficacy. So much of education is cyclical with seasonal activities like setting team norms in fall and revisiting them in winter, and creating SMART goals in fall and celebrating the learning in spring. The trick is to scaffold the learning for teachers and make it feel manageable. You do not need to eat the whale but rather learn together over time and create a culture of competence. Encouraging staff to move out of pockets of compliance and into cultural change can be rewarding as you repeat the right work over time. This first year, focus on ensuring that the right work is in place.

These first six steps are not intended to be a comprehension checklist or the only way to address the work of becoming a PLC. Each school or district leader has to make decisions about communication and messaging based on the existing culture. Nevertheless, these steps will set the foundation from which you can build a PLC culture.

References


Get the print + digital editions

Access AllThingsPLC Magazine whenever, wherever you want: in print, on your desktop, or with your favorite mobile device.

SolutionTree.com/PLCMag