



**Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning  
Communities at Work (Second Edition)**

*By Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many*

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**Action Guide**

This action guide is intended to assist you in the reading of and reflection upon *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work, Second Edition* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Richard Eaker, and Thomas Many.

The guide can be used by an individual, a small group, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, and identify steps that might be taken to promote PLC concepts in a school or school district. The guide is arranged by chapters, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or focus on the specific topic that is addressed in a particular chapter.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we believe that this guide will prove to be a valuable asset for a school that has undertaken the journey to becoming a PLC.

**—Chapter 1—**  
**A Guide to Action for**  
**Professional Learning Communities at Work**

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Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to *Learning by Doing*. In addition to presenting the purposes and format of the book, the authors make the point that in recent years, the term *professional learning communities* has been used to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education. In fact, the term has become so ambiguous that it is in danger of losing all meaning. Chapter 1 clarifies the meaning of *professional learning community*. Reflect on the following questions, and clarify what PLC means in your school or district.

1. What is the fundamental purpose of your school? The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. If visitors came to your school for the very first time, what behaviors would they observe that would indicate learning was indeed the central, overriding purpose of the school?
2. One of the major differences between a more traditional school and a school that functions as a PLC is that a PLC shifts from a focus on *teaching* to a focus on *learning*. If your school adopted learning as its fundamental purpose, what questions would teachers, staff, and administrators ask? What questions would the community as a whole ask of itself?

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3. In a PLC, there is no ambiguity regarding the commitment to learning, and not just the learning of students. Adults in a learning community are continually learning. How does your school promote learning for the adults who work there?
  
4. In their book *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (2000), Pfeffer and Sutton argue that most organizations already know what is required to be successful but fail to act. What are some factors that contribute to a school administration or staff's failure to implement what we know will help all students learn at high levels? What are some ways your school's staff or administration has attempted to overcome these barriers?
  
5. Assume your school is engaged in implementing the professional learning community concept and a reporter is interviewing you for a story for the local newspaper. How would you respond if the reporter asked the question, "Exactly what is a professional learning community?" Reflect on how others in your school or district might respond to this question. Would the answers be fairly consistent? How consistent would their answers be with the definition the authors provide on page 11?
  
6. It is critical that faculty and staff develop a deep, rich understanding of the professional learning community concept and practices. How has your district or school approached the task of ensuring that everyone has gained a common understanding and a common vocabulary? What resources were utilized? In spite

- of the efforts that have been undertaken, are there remaining faculty and staff who have only a cursory understanding of the professional learning community concept? If so, what steps need to be taken to make sure everyone has an accurate understanding of the professional learning community concept and related practices?
7. Has a detailed assessment of the current reality of the state of student learning levels in your school been undertaken? If so, what strengths were revealed? What areas need the most immediate attention? If your school has not assessed its current reality, what would need to be done in order to complete such an assessment?
  8. Michael Fullan (2005, p. 67) has observed that “terms travel easily . . . but the meaning of the underlying concepts do not.” When listening to the language in your school, how precise is the understanding of important PLC terms? How consistently are terms defined? How much time is spent developing a deep, rich understanding of key terms and concepts?
  9. The authors quote Mike Schmoker (2004, p. 85) as observing, “Clarity precedes competence.” As you begin to clarify the term *professional learning community*, think of each of these words: *professional*, *learning*, and *community*. How would you define each of these terms? More specifically, what behaviors would one exhibit if he or she behaved in a *professional* manner? What behaviors would one

exhibit if he or she focused on *learning* and if he or she conducted his or her work as part of a *community*?

### **Activity**

The opening pages of chapter 1 list six essential elements of a PLC. Write one element at the top of each of six separate sheets of chart paper, leaving space to write below.

Number the pages one through six, and post them around the room. Count off by six into small groups. Each group should move to the essential element with the corresponding number as a starting point for a gallery walk.

Discuss the ways in which the essential element is evident in your school or district with your small group, and write the best example on the chart paper. After three minutes, move to the next piece of chart paper, and repeat the process until each group has rotated around the entire room and discussed each of the essential elements. After returning to the starting point, choose one person to report aloud to the whole group.

**—Chapter 2—**  
**A Clear and Compelling Purpose**

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In this chapter, the authors make the case that the very essence of a PLC is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. In fact, this commitment to high levels of learning for all students is the core mission of schools. But how does a school move beyond the pleasant platitudes of a generic mission statement to a culture in which learning is at the center of the day-to-day work of schooling? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In reality, many schools have multiple purposes that go unstated: ensuring the happiness of the adults who work there, protecting individual personal autonomy, providing a place for teachers to teach, and so on. While it is true that schools are asked to do many things, what do you think is the most basic, fundamental purpose of your school? What behaviors have you observed that lead you to your answer?
2. In the case study, Principal Cynthia Dion set out to reculture her school into a PLC by developing a new school mission statement. What are the limitations of relying on a mission statement to change a school's culture? How has your school gone beyond writing a mission statement to embed learning as the core purpose into the culture of your school?

3. The authors make the case that developing a guiding coalition is a powerful strategy in the change process. Principal Dion would have benefited from working through issues with a small group of key staff and securing them as allies before engaging the entire faculty. Have you ever used a guiding coalition to get things done in your school? What was your experience? Who would be some of the key faculty to recruit for a guiding coalition in your school?
  
4. The authors point out that the biggest process mistake the principal made was her failure to build shared knowledge among her staff. Building shared knowledge is the way questions are answered and issues are resolved in a PLC. What are two or three major issues that need to be addressed in your school? What are some ways the faculty could be engaged in building shared knowledge around these issues? What resources could be made available to assist the faculty in building shared knowledge?
  
5. The authors articulate a number of actions the principal and staff in the case study could have taken to convey their commitment to improving their school. Compare the authors' suggestions with actions your school has taken to convey a commitment to improving your school? Were the effects of your school's improvement actions monitored? If so, how effective have your school's actions been? What additional actions need to be taken?

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6. Of course, there is often a huge difference between the school we desire and our willingness to behave in ways essential to creating such a school. This issue is addressed in professional learning communities by developing *collective commitments* each staff member must honor if the school the staff has envisioned is to become a reality. What are some key commitments that would need to be made if your school were to function as a PLC? Why do you feel the authors emphasize these commitments should be stated as behaviors rather than beliefs?
  
7. Reflect on this statement: “When something is truly a priority in an organization, people do not hope it happens; they develop and implement specific plans to ensure that it happens.” What gets planned for in your school?
  
8. Has your school involved staff in setting short-term goals that, if achieved, would move the school toward the agreed-upon vision? If your school accomplished every improvement goal, what would be the impact on student learning?
  
9. It has been said that what gets monitored, gets done. Describe how priorities are monitored and how results are shared with the staff.
  
10. Organizations demonstrate priorities through the allocation of resources—time, money, and human resources. Are the resources in your school allocated according to proclaimed priorities?



11. It has been said that you can tell what is important to someone simply by looking at what is on the front of his or her refrigerator door—pictures of loved ones, daily schedules, to-do lists, and other things that matter. Using the refrigerator door as a metaphor, what would be on your school’s “refrigerator door”? In other words, what really matters—takes precedence—in your school?
  
12. If you were going to make a movie about your school, what would be the title of the movie? Why would you choose this particular title?
  
13. The authors describe a number of “dangerous detours” school leaders might encounter while working to articulate a clear and compelling purpose. Have you experienced any of these? If so, what has been done to “get back on track” and continue to move forward? What have you personally learned as your school has encountered various dangerous detours?

### **Activity 1**

Count off by threes into small groups; work with people you might not see on a daily basis. Working first on your own and then with the other members of your small group, think of ways professionals in your school demonstrate a commitment to learning as the primary purpose. Be specific about the initiatives your school has undertaken and why the program, policy, or procedure has promoted learning as the fundamental purpose of the school. Record your examples on chart paper, and choose the best example to share with the entire group.

## **Activity 2**

Imagine that the local television station has provided you with a sixty-second spot on the evening news to help the community understand the PLC initiative that is underway in your school. Develop your presentation, keeping in mind that you cannot go over sixty seconds, you do not want to leave thirty seconds of “dead” air because you have run out of things to say, and you do not want to use a lot of jargon. Work with a partner as you create your presentation, and be sure to give each other feedback throughout the process.

## **Activity 3**

Use the continuum provided in this chapter (pages 44–49) to reflect on the progress your school has made. Where would you place your school in each of the various categories? What would need to be done to move along the continuum to the next level on the journey to becoming a high-performing professional learning community?

**—Chapter 3—**  
**Creating a Focus on Learning**

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This chapter is based on the proposition that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. Professional learning communities clarify exactly what students are to learn and then monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis. Reflect on the following questions to clarify the assumptions, processes, and procedures that support the learning mission of your school.

1. If learning is, in fact, the fundamental purpose of a school, the next obvious question is, “Learn what?” To what degree have collaborative teams examined, clarified, prioritized, and made public the essential outcomes for every subject, grade, course, and unit? Why would such an endeavor be necessary if the state and/or district have already provided schools with curriculum guides?
  
2. On page 66, the authors describe how teachers in the White River School District clarify student learning outcomes by asking teams to reach agreement regarding what each standard, if mastered, would look like in terms of student work. What would be the advantages of teams collaboratively addressing this question?
  
3. In the case study, the authors describe a school where teachers resisted attempts to agree on the most essential learnings for students. Has this happened in your school? Why do teachers sometimes resist making a commitment to a common

- curriculum? Identify sources of resistance, and discuss or reflect on ways to respond.
4. Ownership is a key factor in whether teachers will actually teach particular outcomes. Yet there is an obvious need for consistency, especially within teaching teams. The authors urge readers to avoid the “Tyranny of Or” and embrace the “Genius of And.” How could a district apply the Genius of And to the need for staff ownership of the curriculum and consistency of curriculum across the district?
  5. In this chapter, there is an emphasis on the need for reducing curriculum content. What are the key points the authors make? Do you agree? Have you undertaken a process to reduce content in your school’s curriculum?
  6. The authors note that “one of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop the agreed-upon knowledge and skills” (page 75). What would be an appropriate response to teachers who ask why collaboratively developed common assessments are important? What are some potential barriers to creating common assessments? How could these barriers be overcome?

7. The authors also suggest that common, team-developed formative assessments are “so powerful [in school improvement] that no team of teachers should be allowed to opt out of creating them” (page 76). What are the implications of this statement for those who have different roles within the school? Specifically, consider the following: What is the role of the teacher (or teacher teams) in developing a system of high-quality common assessments? What is the role of the principal? What is the role of the district office?
8. On page 63, the authors describe three things that must occur if common formative assessments are to be effective. To what degree have these occurred in your school or district? If they have not occurred, what are the next steps that need to be taken?
9. On pages 67–69, the authors describe a number of strategies for monitoring student learning. How would you respond if there were a few teachers on the staff who indicate they simply do not want to participate in such strategies? For example, consider how you might respond to the teacher who says, “Just give me my kids and leave me alone!”
10. It is not enough to ask teachers to focus on the critical questions of learning; resources must be made available to teaching teams. Some appropriate resources are suggested in this chapter. To what extent do teaching teams in your school

have these resources available? Are additional resources needed? If so, what are they?

11. After reading the section “Dangerous Detours and Seductive Shortcuts,” reflect on the efforts your school or district has made to avoid or overcome similar “bumps in the road.”

### **Activity 1**

In groups of three, talk about becoming a PLC, and identify two or three things you would like to have in place by the end of the year. Using markers and chart paper, illustrate your vision with a drawing or graphic representation. After five minutes, choose one person to report aloud to the whole group.

### **Activity 2**

Engage your faculty and staff in the Keep, Drop, Create activity described on pages 65–66.

### **Activity 3**

Have teams review the worksheet Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey Continuum and determine their perceptions of where your school is on the journey and the next steps that need to be taken.

**—Chapter 4—**  
**How Will We Respond**  
**When Some Students Don't Learn?**

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In previous chapters, the authors make the case for collaboratively clarifying the essential outcomes for each subject, grade, course, and unit and for creating common, formative, teacher-developed assessments as powerful tools for school improvement. However, in this chapter, the authors explain that it is pointless to clarify outcomes and develop common assessments if the school is not prepared to intervene when the staff discovers some students are experiencing difficulty in their learning. Why should schools develop systematic plans to provide students with additional time and support within the school day, and how can such plans be developed? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In the case study, it became obvious to Principal Mathers that individual teachers responded in very different ways when students experienced difficulty in their learning. To what extent is this the case in your school? What are some of the different responses you have observed?
  
2. Think about Principal Mathers' observation, "It was as if the school was playing an educational lottery with the lives of children—rolling the dice to see which students would receive an excellent opportunity to learn algebra and which would not." Do you think Principal Mathers' observations describe conditions in your school? In what way(s)?

3. Effectively responding to students who experience difficulty in their learning requires a systematic process of intervention—a collective response—rather than relying on the actions of individual teachers (see page 97). If you were asked by the Parent Teacher Association to deliver an address on the topic of “Helping *All Students Learn*,” how would you describe your school’s “systematic” plan of intervention to provide students with additional time and support when they struggle with their learning? Do you think all teachers in your school would provide a similar description? Is your school’s plan for providing students with additional time, support or enrichment in writing? What would be the advantages of developing a *written* plan that is widely distributed?
  
4. The authors suggest that Principal Mathers might develop an intervention plan for supporting student learning by first creating a process through which the staff examines the “brutal facts” of their current situation and then studies best practices for responding to students who are experiencing difficulty in their learning. Is this generally how issues are addressed in your school? What are the advantages of such a process?
  
5. React to the following statement: “It is disingenuous for any school to claim its purpose is to help all students learn at high levels, and then fail to create a system of interventions to give struggling learners additional time and support for learning” (page 104).



6. React to the following statement by Cole and Schlechty (1993, p. 10): “In the factory model of schooling, quality was the variable; time was constant. Students were given a set amount of work to do in a set period of time, and then graded on the quality of what was accomplished. We held time constant and allowed quality to vary. We must turn that on its head and hold quality constant, and allow time to vary.” What implications does their observation have for your school?
  
7. The authors note that when schools have successfully created systemic interventions to provide additional time and support for students using existing resources, in each case it was imperative that the staff agree to modify the schedule and assume new roles and responsibilities (see page 99). Suppose a teacher made the following observation: “We all want to provide additional time and support for students. It’s just that our schedule won’t allow it! We simply cannot take any more time away from instructional time. We don’t have enough instructional time to cover all the material we are required to cover.” How would you respond to this teacher’s concerns?
  
8. In part two of this chapter (Here’s How), the authors make the case that schools must develop *systematic* plans to provide students with additional time and support within the school day. What do the authors mean by *systematic*? Does your school have such a plan? Is your school plan *timely*, ensuring students get help when they first experience difficulty? And is it *directive* rather than *invitational*?

9. This chapter contains the observation that “individual teachers working in isolation as they attempt to help all of their students achieve at high levels will eventually be overwhelmed by the tension between covering the content and responding to the diverse needs of students in a fixed amount of time with virtually no external support” (page 104). Do you agree with this observation? How do you think teachers typically respond to this tension?

### **Activity 1**

In groups of three to five, list the resources you use to identify the essential outcomes in your school (for example, state standards, district curriculum guides, publishers’ pacing guides, or national benchmarks). In what way do these resources impact lesson plans on a weekly or a daily basis? Ask yourselves, “What is our current reality regarding essential outcomes in our district, in our school, and on our team?”

### **Activity 2**

Working in teams, analyze the Assessing Our Progress Continuum, reflecting where your school is on each section of the continuum and identifying the steps that need to be taken in order to move forward on your journey to becoming a professional learning community.

### **Activity 3**

Create two overlapping circles. Label the left circle “intervention” and the right “remediation.” Have teachers brainstorm the similarities and differences in the two terms.

Do the same thing with the terms *accommodation* and *modification*. What other terms are there that teachers should clarify?

#### **Activity 4**

Working in teams, use the SPEED criteria on page 100 to analyze the pyramid of interventions in your school and identify some of the key criteria. Are they the same or different than the SPEED criteria? Design your own acronym to describe the criteria of a quality intervention at your school.

—Chapter 5—  
**Building the Collaborative Culture  
of a Professional Learning Community**

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In this chapter, the authors note that the collaborative team is the fundamental building block of a professional learning community. Members of a PLC recognize they cannot accomplish their fundamental purpose of high levels of learning for all students unless they work together collaboratively. The quality of work in professional learning communities depends, to a great degree, on the quality of collaboration that is embedded into a school's culture. Reflect on the following questions.

1. The concept of reciprocal accountability defined in the introduction is a particularly helpful tool for enhancing team effectiveness. How effectively has the concept been utilized in your school or district to guide the work of teams? Are there ways the concept could be better employed to enhance team effectiveness? If so, how?
2. In the case study, some teachers accused Principal McDonald of abandoning the middle school concept by placing emphasis on student learning. The debate deteriorated into a choice between the emotional well-being of students versus ensuring all students learn at high levels. In what ways is this situation an example of the Tyranny of Or? How could the Genius of And be utilized in such a situation?

3. Principal McDonald experienced difficulty embedding the work of collaborative teams into the day-to-day work of the school. What did Principal McDonald fail to do? If you were advising Principal McDonald, what advice would you give?
  
4. If you were asked why schools should organize into collaborative teams, what would be your response? What evidence could you cite in your response? Is there any research that supports the contention that the best way to organize a school is by having individual teachers work in isolation? What would your response be to a teacher who might say that he or she is being asked to sacrifice content time for collaborative time?
  
5. A very effective teacher makes the following point in a meeting with the school principal: “I feel I am a good teacher. I have been getting very good results with my students for years. In fact, my students routinely have the highest student achievement scores in the school and some of the best in the district. I understand the school is emphasizing the collaborative team concept and that is fine with me. I am not opposed. But I just don’t feel the need to participate. I don’t think I would benefit in any way and it would take away time from me and my students. So I don’t want to be assigned to a team. I will continue to do a great job with my students. It is fine with me if other teachers are in teams, but I feel I should have the right to continue on my own.” How would you respond to this teacher? What message would your response send to other teachers throughout the school?

6. How are teams organized in your school—by grade level, department, course, discipline, or by other classifications? What is the underlying rationale for the team structure in your schools?
  
7. Are there situations in your school in which a single teacher may be the only teacher of a grade level or content area? In what ways do teachers in these situations collaborate? What suggestions do the authors offer for providing collaboration opportunities for teachers who are the only teachers in a particular grade level or content area?
  
8. Educators frequently identify time constraints as the major barrier to collaboration. Do teachers have weekly collaborative time in your school? What are some of the suggestions found in this chapter for creating collaborative time?
  
9. The authors note that one of the most effective ways to enhance the productivity of teams is to insist that they develop products or artifacts related to the critical questions of learning. What are some examples of these products? In your school, when teams are asked to develop products, are they given clear directions, expectations, research, rubrics (when appropriate), and examples?
  
10. This chapter contains a research-based list of characteristics of teams that demonstrate high emotional intelligence. Do teams in your school reflect these

- characteristics? Which characteristics are strongest? Which characteristics seem to be the weakest?
11. Both Daniel Goleman (2002) and Patrick Lencioni (2005) contend that establishing norms is a critical factor in the effectiveness of a team, a strategy that can help determine whether a group will function as a real team or just a loose collection of individuals. If norms are the collective commitments members make to each other regarding the way in which they will work together, what commitments should you and your colleagues make to each other to increase the likelihood of your success?
12. React to Michael Fullan’s (2001, p. 67) statement that “collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong.” What has been your experience when working on collaborative teams? Have your teams focused on the “right things”? What are the right things?
13. It is critical that school leaders continually work to enhance the effectiveness of each team. How should the quality of the work of teams be monitored? How should teams’ effectiveness ultimately be evaluated?

### **Activity 1**

The authors have established that norms, protocols, and clear SMART goals help teams focus their collaborative efforts. Using the Critical Issues for Team Consideration worksheet found

on pages 130–131 as a guide, talk with your colleagues and analyze the steps taken by your school to help focus collaboration within your team.

## **Activity 2**

Engage teams in determining their position on the Assessing Your Progress Continuum.

What are the next steps teams in your school need to take in order to increase their effectiveness?



—Chapter 6—  
**Creating a Results Orientation  
in a Professional Learning Community**

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In many schools and school districts, judgments about effectiveness are linked to assessments of activities as well as to the development of plans for future improvement. While recognizing that planning is important, members of a PLC assess their effectiveness on the basis of results—tangible evidence their students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their future success. How does a school or district create a *results orientation* among the very people who are called upon to improve results—the administrators and teachers in each school? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In the case study, the district mission statement emphasized providing “a rigorous academic curriculum” as opposed to ensuring high levels of learning. Is there a difference between the “planned” curriculum in schools and the “learned” curriculum of students? Has your school made the shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning? What evidence can you cite that such a shift has, in fact, taken place?
2. The authors draw attention to the minimal impact strategic planning has on learning. Examine the planning efforts in your district. How aligned is the goal setting process between the board of education, central office, building administration and classroom teacher? (See pages 157–158.)

3. It has been said that in a PLC there is a shift from a focus on *intentions* or *activities* to a focus on *results*. What does this statement mean? What are some things your school has done in order to develop a results orientation?
  
4. The authors suggest some important distinctions between different kinds of goals. What has your school done to identify the difference between a stretch goal (at the district level) and an obtainable goal (at the team level)? (See pages 160–161.)
  
5. The authors note that a key strategy for creating a results orientation throughout the district is for leaders to (1) identify a limited number of very focused goals and (2) use well-designed processes to drive those goals, not only into each school, but also into every classroom. To what extent have focused learning goals been developed in your school or district? What has been the effect of focused learning goals on individual classrooms?
  
6. It has been argued that a school can only create a results orientation by focusing on results rather than activities. Consider the following questions and answer each within the context of your school. (See pages 157–159.)
  - a) How will the achievement of goals be measured? What are some appropriate indicators, measures and targets for SMART goals.
  - b) What process is in place to link SMART goals written at the individual, team, and building level to the district’s stretch goals?

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- c) What process is in place to regularly monitor the progress of individual, team, building and district goals? How frequently is the progress reviewed at the team, building, and district level?
  
7. This chapter emphasizes developing SMART goals. To what degree do your school and/or district goals meet the SMART goals standards? Are they strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound?
  
8. Why should educators focus on ensuring each collaborative team in every school is working toward SMART goals that are specifically linked to a few school and district goals?
  
9. The authors recommend that teams create specific learning goals. To what degree has this been done in your school? How were the goals developed? Have teams developed some short-term goals that can serve as benchmarks of progress, as well as a few stretch goals? Have plans been developed to monitor each team's goals? How is this accomplished? Are team goals linked to a few school and district goals?
  
10. What efforts have been undertaken in your school or district to limit the number of initiatives? How does the central office staff serve as a buffer from the constant array of new ideas, fads, and initiatives? The authors emphasize the importance of developing "stop doing" lists. Have such lists been developed in your school or

district? What are some things that educators in your school and/or district should stop doing?

11. Often schools and school districts are judged by the quality of their strategic planning processes. The result of such processes ultimately is a document that declares and prioritizes intentions. What are the weaknesses of relying on strategic plans as a basis for assessing effectiveness?

### **Activity 1**

Working in grade-level or departmental teams, examine your goals from last year. Analyze them using the SMART goal worksheet found on page 163. Identify ways the goals for your team could be improved.

### **Activity 2**

Obtain copies of the district and building goals. As a faculty, produce a summary by school and district of those policies, practices, and procedures that do not promote a results orientation, and create specific recommendations as to what can be done to encourage and support a stronger connection.

### **Activity 3**

Collaboratively assess your school's place on the Assessing Your Progress Continuum. What are the next steps that need to be taken?

**—Chapter 7—**  
**Using Relevant Information to Improve Results**

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This chapter gives focus to the power of locally developed common assessments. The authors make the case that common assessments developed by collaborative teacher teams are the best ways to provide powerful feedback to teachers and turn data into useful information. How can a school culture shift from being “data rich but information poor” to one in which teachers have timely access to powerful and authentic information that can impact professional practice in ways that enhance student learning? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In the case study, a number of teachers raised concerns about the development and use of common assessments. Have (or would) teachers in your school raise similar concerns? What would some of the concerns be at your school? How would you respond to concerns about the development and use of common assessments?
2. The authors make the case that using protocols helps collaborative teams become more efficient and more effective in analyzing assessment results (see pages 185–190). With this idea as a context for your discussion, react to the following statement: “Protocols help teams be more effective and efficient in analyzing assessment results. Therefore, the use of some kind of protocols is expected (tight); however, which protocol to use is left to the discretion of the team (loose).”

3. The authors contend that a PLC should create systems to ensure that each teacher receives frequent and timely feedback on the performance of his or her students on a valid common assessment. They argue that these assessments must evaluate students' progress toward meeting an agreed-upon proficiency standard established by the collaborative team in comparison to other students in the school attempting to meet the same standard. They go on to advocate that every teacher should have a collaborative team to turn to and learn from as he or she explores ways to improve learning for students. To what extent does your school reflect these practices?
  
4. Reflect on this statement: "Teams need to reach the point where they are analyzing student work, kid by kid, skill by skill." To what depth do teams analyze student learning in your school? In what ways could the analysis of student learning be enhanced?
  
5. Common assessments developed locally by collaborative teams of teachers provide the vehicle for creating a culture of continuous improvement. As the authors note, "Members of PLCs recognize their challenge is not to get it right and keep it going, but to 'get it right and make it better and better'" (Champy, 1995, p. 27, quoted on page 194). Does this statement reflect the culture of your school? If someone were to ask how common assessments drive a culture of continuous improvement, what would your answer be?

6. Schools or districts that hope to become professional learning communities will create the structures and cultures to ensure data are easily accessible and openly shared among teachers who are working together interdependently toward the same SMART goal. Respond to Michael Fullan’s belief that, in Mike Schmoker’s (2002) words, “successful schools are places where teams of teachers meet regularly to focus on student work through assessment and change their instructional practices accordingly to get better results” (p. 10).
  
7. The authors say that teacher dialogue moves from sharing opinions to building shared knowledge of best practice through the collective examination of results—tangible evidence of student learning. How often does your team review samples of student work? Does your team adjust instruction based on the examination of student work or the results of common assessments?
  
8. What is the difference between formative and summative assessment? Look at the last four tests that were given to your class. How many were formative, and how many were summative?

### **Activity 1**

Appoint one member of the team as the observer while the rest of the team uses the Descriptive Review protocol described on page 189 to analyze a common assessment. Once the team has completed the discussion of the common assessment, talk about the pros and cons of using protocols to facilitate the work of teams. Talk about what the

”work” of the team would look like if using protocols became a routine way of looking at improving teachers’ professional practice.

(For more information on protocols teachers can visit the National School Reform Faculty website at [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org). The Looking at Student Work website at [www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org) is another excellent site for more examples of other protocols.)

## **Activity 2**

Collaboratively determine your school’s place on the Assessing Your Progress Continuum and determine the next steps that need to be taken.



**—Chapter 8—**  
**Implementing the PLC Process Districtwide**

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In this chapter, the authors stress the importance of clear goals and priorities, arguing that leadership behavior must align with these goals before rhetorical commitments can be translated into specific action. How can district leaders strike the right balance of “tight” and “loose” leadership styles, and ensure that each is focusing on the right areas to promote greater unity of vision and action? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In the case study, Superintendent Ditka saw uneven results even though he felt he had done everything right. Why was this so? Identify three things he did well and three things you would recommend he do differently next time.
  
2. In your district, what systems are in place to monitor the implementation of your PLC initiative?
  
3. The authors frequently refer to the importance of the concept of reciprocal accountability. What rights and obligations does this concept imply for district leadership and for school personnel? Are the expectations for principals and teachers clear? Are the resources needed to successfully meet those expectations available? If so, are they utilized effectively?
  
4. The authors make the point that it is important to clarify and create agreement around common terminology (see page 219). Specifically, what efforts have been

- made to clarify terminology in your district? Have these efforts been effective?  
What else could be done to create agreement around common terminology?
5. The authors point out that schools seeking to implement PLC concepts in their schools should focus on behavior first and culture last (see page 213). What steps have been taken to ensure faculty and staff exhibit certain behaviors throughout the district? What are these expected behaviors? How were they communicated? How are they monitored? How have these expected behaviors affected district culture?
6. The key to district improvement is “doing” rather than simply “knowing.” What has been done to build shared knowledge around specifically what needs to be *done* to improve student learning in schools throughout your district?

### **Activity**

Reflect on the implementation process at your school, and respond to the following statement by Dean Fixen: “Is it possible that the improvement initiative failed because it was the wrong program or is it possible it was the right program poorly implemented? To illustrate his point, draw a T-chart on a piece of chart paper, and think of one initiative that was implemented poorly and another that was implemented well. Brainstorm some possible reasons why one failed and another succeeded. Are there any similarities? Are there differences?”

**—Chapter 9—**  
**Consensus and Conflict**  
**in a Professional Learning Community**

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It is unrealistic to think that every teacher will be enthusiastic about the various practices found in schools that function as professional learning communities. There are bound to be those who resist certain practices and initiatives. This fact often creates a dilemma for leaders—they recognize the need to move forward, yet they would like to have everyone “on board.” So, how does a school that functions as a PLC deal with consensus and conflict? Reflect on the following questions.

1. In the case study, Principal Roth attempted to change Fred’s attitude. Have you had much success in changing the attitude of others? After reflecting on this chapter, what should Principal Roth have focused on? What approach do the authors recommend for impacting someone’s attitude?
  
2. Principal Roth wanted to build consensus, yet developed no clear definition of consensus. This chapter contains a continuum of various definitions of consensus. Which definition fits the operational definition of consensus in your school? What do you think an appropriate definition of consensus should be? Why?
  
3. The authors offer the following definition of consensus: “We have arrived at consensus when (1) all points of view have been heard and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it” (page 228). What are your thoughts on this

- definition? How does this definition support efforts to move forward with particular proposals and initiatives?
4. If “getting everyone on board” is the criterion for reaching consensus in your school, how many faculty members would it require to block a new initiative from being undertaken? What would be the advantage of reaching a working definition of consensus prior to engaging faculty in discussions about possible changes or new initiatives?
  5. Think of a professional decision that you recently were involved in making. Did the decision-making process create winners and losers? If consensus was reached, how was it accomplished?
  6. One of the most important ways a school’s core values are reinforced is by thoughtful, professional confrontation. We must be prepared to confront those who act in ways that are contrary to the priorities of the school and the collective commitments of the staff. What behaviors are confronted in your school? What would it take for someone to point out to a staff member that his or her behavior was incongruent with the shared values of the school?
  7. Garmston and Wellman (1999, p. 183) encouraged teachers to embrace the importance of conflict on collaborative teams when they suggested that “successful groups know how to fight gracefully—they embrace the positive aspects of conflict

- and actively minimize the negative aspects. Successful teams recognize conflict as an important resource for forging better practices.” How is conflict resolved on your team? How is it resolved at your school?
8. Members of a PLC understand that the most powerful learning occurs in a context of taking action. What specific actions have been undertaken in your school to improve learning? How has your school dealt with those who resist any meaningful change?
  9. Consider the following statement: “If leaders are unwilling to deal with resisters, they are left to improve their school one retirement at a time.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
  10. Andy Hargreaves (as cited in Sparks, 2004) has said, “Professional learning communities . . . [bring] teachers together to talk about how they can improve the learning of all students as they challenge and question each other’s practice in *spirited but optimistic ways*” (p. 48, emphasis added). Would you describe the professional dialogue in your school as spirited and optimistic? If not, how would you describe the dialogue in your school?

### **Activity 1**

The authors frequently hear that professional learning communities make sense, but often, agreement is followed by the inevitable “yes, but” statement. Statements like,

“Yes, it sounds great, but it would never work in our school,” or, “Yes, but we don’t have time to do all that work,” or, “Yes, but I can’t work with that person” are all signals of resistance. Write down the “yes, but” statements that you have heard when your colleagues talk about becoming a PLC.

Categorize the sources of resistance into one of three categories—lack of commitment, lack of knowledge and skills, or a lack of confidence and self-efficacy. Once the source of resistance has been identified, develop a plan to respond in a direct and supportive way.

## **Activity 2**

Think of a situation in which you would like to change someone’s mind—for example, a student, a colleague, a parent, your child, or your supervisor. Working in pairs, describe the situation, and talk through how you could use the seven strategies identified by Howard Gardner (pages 232–233) for changing someone’s mind.

**—Chapter 10—**  
**The Complex Challenge**  
**of Creating Professional Learning Communities**

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Becoming a PLC is much more than going through a certain, prescribed number of steps. As the authors point out, there is no recipe for reculturing schools. *How* things are done is often as important as *what* is being done. In this chapter, the authors emphasize the importance of hope, passion, and persistence. Reflect on the following questions.

1. The authors contend that leaders must foster hope throughout the organization. Why is fostering hope so important? In what ways can hope become part of a school's culture? How is hope connected to self-efficacy?
  
2. Reflect on this statement: "Hope burns brightest in those who believe in their ability to impact the future. Leaders of learning communities will keep hope alive in their schools and districts by modeling that belief and calling upon all staff to do the same." Can you cite an example of a person who helped you believe in your ability to succeed in a difficult situation? What did that person do to inspire hope and self-efficacy in you?
  
3. Why are modeling and celebrating so important in a PLC? How does celebrating differ in a PLC from more traditional schools?
  
4. The authors assert, "The most common cause of the demise of PLC initiatives is not the result of a single cataclysmic event. . . . They die from a thousand small wounds"

- (pages 256–257). What is the message they are sending to those attempting to build professional learning communities?
5. Being passionate is not enough. The issue is, “What are we passionate about?” What will be the focus of passionate endeavors in your school as it functions as a PLC? What endeavors are the focus of the most passion in your school or school district?
  6. The authors cite Pfeffer and Sutton’s (2000) “deceptively simple” solution to the knowing-doing problem. What is that solution? Cite specific examples of how you are applying it in your efforts to become a PLC.
  7. Ultimately, the testimonials of educators who work in schools that function as professional learning communities provide the best evidence of the power of the PLC concept. This chapter contains comments from educators who work in PLC cultures. Which of these statements had the most meaning for you? If students, parents, teachers, and administrators described working in your school, what do you think their statements would be? What would you like them to be?
  8. In what ways does the PLC concept support a conscious and sustained effort to create the conditions that allow educators to become more skillful in their profession? To what degree are these conditions present in your school?



**Activity**

Think of something you are passionate about. It might be golf, painting, or exercise. It might be related to your family, friends, church, or school. It can be personal or professional, but it should be something you can discuss comfortably with a partner. Write it down, and reflect for a moment.

Working in pairs, talk about how you feel when you are experiencing or engaged in that passion. Determine the actions or behaviors you exhibit when pursuing your passion. Did you have to learn deeply about it? Did you spend time improving and practicing it over and over? What commitments do you make to your passion? Can you imagine ways that your school can passionately pursue becoming a PLC?

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