

LEADING IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Robert Eaker

Department of Educational Leadership
Middle Tennessee State University

Deborah Gonzalez

Puget Sound Educational Service District
Renton, Washington

ABSTRACT

This article asserts that strong leadership is necessary to build and sustain professional learning communities and explores the kind of leadership most effective in meeting that challenge. It calls upon leaders to apply the concept of simultaneous loose and tight leadership – establishing clear priorities and parameters they expect everyone in the school to observe while encouraging maximum autonomy within those parameters. It contends leaders of professional learning communities will shift the focus of the school from teaching to learning, will be attentive to shaping culture, will ensure widely-dispersed leadership, and will appeal to emotions as well as the bottom line.

The recognition that effective leadership is a critical element of effective schooling isn't a particularly new or novel idea. Virtually every study of effective schooling practices has noted the connection between effective schools and leadership (Marzano, 2003). As Larry Lezotte and Kathleen McKee (2006) write, "Whatever the model of school improvement chosen, the degree to which a school or district is successful in implementing positive and sustainable change depends on a very important factor: an effective

leader" (p. xii). What then are the leadership strategies of those who have been most effective in transforming their schools and districts into professional learning communities?

One: The Learning Leader

Leaders of professional learning communities sincerely and passionately accept *learning* rather than *teaching* as the fundamental purpose of schools. Therefore, they "shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results" (DuFour, 2002, p. 15).

This shift in focus is more than mere semantics. Learning leaders *embed* the learning mission into the day-to-day operations of the school. They create systems and processes to engage collaborative teams of teachers in 1) clarifying the essential knowledge and skills students are to acquire for every course, grade level, and unit of instruction 2) developing frequent common assessments to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, and 3) implementing a school-wide plan of interventions to guarantee students receive additional time and support for learning as soon as they experience difficulty. The question that drives the work of these leaders, and ultimately the entire school, is not, "was it taught," but rather, "was it learned."

Two: The Leader as a Shaper of Culture

The traditional approach to school improvement has focused on changing structures - policies, rules, schedules, and the size of schools. Although structural changes can typically be implemented rather quickly and easily, they are never enough to have a significant, long-term impact on student learning. Meaningful, sustainable improvement requires cultural changes – changes in the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits

that constitute the norm for those within an organization. Without attention to culture, efforts to improve schools are doomed to fail (Sarason, 1996).

Learning leaders recognize the importance of school structure, but they also tackle the more difficult and complex task of shaping school *culture* to support professional learning community concepts. Their strategies invariably include: (1) fostering collaboration (2) encouraging experimentation and autonomy within well-defined parameters, and (3) clarifying, promoting, protecting, and defending the shared values (that is, the collective commitments) that support the fundamental purpose of learning for all students.

Leading Collaborative Teams

Peter Senge, et al. (1994) wrote, "history has brought us to a moment where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done" (p. 354). Indeed, administrators throughout the country are organizing their staffs into teams (i.e., the third grade team, the biology team, the departmental team, etc.).

Leaders in professional learning communities however, go beyond simply assigning individuals to teams: they create processes to ensure those teams focus on the critical questions associated with student learning. They monitor the work of the teams through specific products that flow directly from team collaborative dialogues. Such products will include lists of essential outcomes, curriculum pacing guides, criteria for assessing the quality of student work, common formative assessments, analysis of student achievement on assessments, and strategies for improving results. These leaders do not settle for "collaboration lite." They create and monitor systematic processes to ensure all staff members work together interdependently to improve professional practice and help more students learn at higher levels (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2005).

Autonomy Within Parameters

In their classic book *In Search of Excellence* (1982) Peters and Waterman describe experimentation and autonomy within defined parameters as "simultaneous loose-tight properties". They refer to simultaneous loose/tight leadership as... "the co-existence of firm central direction and maximum individual autonomy" (p. 318). The most effective leaders of PLCs are masterful in applying the concept of loose-tight leadership. They recognize that certain critical issues *must* be addressed and certain important tasks *must* be accomplished in a PLC. Teams must work collaboratively, students must have access to the same essential learning, student proficiency must be monitored through frequent common formative assessments, and students must be provided with additional time and support for learning when they experience difficulty. Learning leaders are *tight* in those areas, demanding faithfulness to specific principles and practices. At the same time, however, they provide individuals and teams in their schools or districts with considerable autonomy and freedom in terms of *how* things get done on a day-to-day basis. They are "loose" in terms of much of the implementation. As a result, professionals within the school have the benefit of clear parameters that provide direction and coherence to the improvement process at the same time they are given the freedom and tools to make their own contribution to that process.

Promoting, Protecting, Defending and Celebrating

Larry Lezotte (1997) has identified "creating a community of shared values" as the fundamental leadership function in contemporary organizations (p. 74). Learning leaders are attentive to that function, constantly promoting, protecting and defending the mission of learning and the staff's collaboratively developed and publicly stated core values. They frequently and publicly recognize and celebrate the best examples of the values that are exhibited by the staff, both individually and collectively. Equally important, they are willing to confront behavior that

is incongruent with the agreed-upon values. People in their schools come to understand what is important and valued by observing what their leaders celebrate and confront.

Three: A Leader of Leaders

Successful professional learning communities avoid what Jim Collins (2001, p.45) refers to as the “genius with a thousand helpers” mentality. Instead, the culture of a professional learning community is one in which leadership is distributed throughout the school and leaders are expected to set up their successors for success. The distribution of leadership has been shown to be a key factor in successfully implementing comprehensive reform (Smylie, Wenzel, & Fendt, 2003). Learning leaders intentionally work to develop the leadership capacity of the staff by creating structures that allow teachers to fully participate in leadership processes. They include designated staff members on a guiding coalition to monitor the school’s improvement. They invite staff to participate on task forces assigned to examine and improve an element of the school’s operation. They designate leaders for teams. They recognize that one of the most significant responsibilities of a leader is to help others believe in their own capacity to lead, and their goal is to ensure every classroom is directed by a confident and capable teacher-leader.

Touching the Emotions

Ultimately, the quality of the work that is done in professional learning communities depends on leaders who are passionate and hold deep, intense convictions; leaders who reach out to lift each member of the community to his or her place of greatest potential. Thus, leaders in a professional learning community appeal to the heart. Goleman et al. (2002) write, “Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions” (p.3).

Learning leaders motivate and inspire, they create a sense of confidence and optimism regarding success. They exude a “we-can-do-it” attitude. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004) writes that, “Confidence underlies the performance of individuals, teams, businesses, schools, economies, and nations. The fundamental task of leaders is to develop confidence in advance of victory, in order to attract the investments that make victory possible—money, talent, support, loyalty, attention, effort, or people’s best thinking” (p. 18).

Learning leaders, do not, however, overlook a brutal fact: real change is real hard. They recognize that transforming a school culture is difficult, complex, and often bewildering. Therefore, they model tenacious persistence. They stay the course.

The professional learning community certainly represents a powerful concept, a concept that offers educators the best hope for substantive school improvement. The successful implementation of that concept, however, will depend upon the skill and the will of those who lead the process. The emphasis on collaboration, collective inquiry, and empowered professionals does not eliminate the need for effective leadership. The most capable leaders will be those who define their role as the shapers and keepers of a culture committed to learning – for students *and* adults.

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