



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series May 2014 Are You PLC Lite?

Terms travel easily. PLC is one of them. Many of us have them, but how we use them is really quite varied. The problem is that the results vary as widely as the manner in which we decide to implement our collaboration time. As a principal, I am constantly faced with decisions which could potentially allow for other agenda items to become more important than the mission itself. When we sacrifice our values we give permission to others to believe that the vision you have set before your staff is really not that important. There are, however, specific paradigms that wedge their way into our work and slowly disrupt our best intentions. When this happens we fall victim to the knowing-doing gap. This is a common misstep in PLC. We all know a well-intended leader working very hard to effect change in a building or district, but the results are a ‘mixed bag.’ The reasons why this occurs are due to both internal and external factors, some within our control, and others outside of it. I would argue these barriers to successful implementation are identifiable and navigable.

#### The PLC Knowing-Doing Gap

Professional Learning Communities have made their impact on many school districts across the nation. The level of implementation has much to do with the leader’s ability to understand and implement these concepts. Stanford professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton studied the knowing-doing gap (2000) focusing on understanding the barriers of turning knowledge into action and how to overcome these barriers. In their book, they discuss five principles that define the knowing-doing gap. These five principles apply to the implementation of PLCs as well.

**If you know by doing, then there is no gap.** Whether you are implementing PLC from the ground level or piloting a new initiative, the best method for getting better is simply to learn by doing. We sometimes overthink our steps and wait until all the details align before engaging the work. At Glacier Middle School in the White River School District, we began the process of reviewing common assessment data in our PLC teams. In many respects we were unsure of whether what we were doing was the correct way. However, once we began the process we realized what needed to change and we made those changes in the moment. Because we did this together as a team the change was meaningful and the new product had ownership. We have developed the mantra – Get started, get better. The bottom line is that no matter how intimidating, or unwieldy the next step might be, just get started. Expect to make mistakes. That is what you are looking for; learning opportunities

that arise in the moment and get fixed in the moment. Getting started right now, making mistakes, and fixing them in the moment is the quickest route to learning at high levels. Isn't that what we would want for our students to do?

**Talk.** Does your PLC suffer from excessive talk and a lack of action? PLCs are prone to this dynamic. Without a well-established agenda, a strong team leader, and norms which hold team members accountable, PLCs quickly lose their power to the side bar conversation, the hidden agenda, or the 'nay-sayer.' When these conversations take over, you have effectively broken a promise to your stake-holders, the school board, your parents, and students. This is simply unacceptable. The time dedicated to PLC time must remain pure to its intent. Train your team leaders annually to draw them closer to the heart of the work and more deeply connected to the mission of improving student learning.

**Memory.** I call this 'status quo' thinking or 'This is the way we have always done things around here.' School systems are notorious for adhering to "the way things used to be." The irony is that never in the history of education have we been in more need of doing something drastically different with how we teach our youngsters. The fact of the matter is that as we become well practiced at something we become rigid in how we do it. When we ask our teachers to meet in PLCs, collect data, share results with each other, and make changes to our practice, we are effectively asking teachers to change what they know and do differently. We are asking our teachers to feel anxiety and discomfort. Creating tension by implementing change is an emotional and trying effort. Stay true to your target, work with these mindsets as you grow forward.

**Fear.** The concept is simple. People may fear taking risks, sharing information, or making suggestions for improvement, especially if they think that they will be punished for doing so (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). I have witnessed a staff share widespread concern that the data being collected on student learning was going to be used against them in year-end evaluations. The reality is that PLCs are professional development for teachers. Sharing data allows teachers to learn from each other and grow in their professional practice. When we implement PLCs with fidelity we need to confront fear by giving voice to teams to make decisions, open the channels for healthy communication, go soft on ideas and hard on people, treat failure as an opportunity to grow, punish inaction, give second and third chances, learn from and celebrate mistakes, follow creativity, and banish people, especially leaders who humiliate others (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

**Measurement.** Data is our world. We have become an industry that champions the use of data and appropriately so. We are held accountable to it and we constantly seek and analyze it. The downfall is that many of us are poorly versed in the appropriate use of data; and more often than not wallow in the wrong data. Often times less is more. Too much focus on the wrong data obstructs good judgment. The key to using data effectively is to be intentional about the purpose of using it. If your goal is to determine whether or not students learned a specific standard, then keep your data specific to that purpose and no more.

While these are important considerations, it is also equally important to consider your building and district culture as well. The gap between knowing and doing is not a struggle for one individual. It is an organizational phenomenon. The very nature of leading an organization embodies an organic element which requires human relations and behavioral dynamics. Building trust, confidence, and morale is essential for establishing a strong and safe environment for changing a culture. As we lead in our work, we must be cognizant of the effect we play on the organization and how we interpret problems. Instead of creating a solution to fix the problem, we need to go to the root cause and solve the issue there. Having a keen sense of the gap will enable us to see how we allow for problems to occur, and begin solving the problem by looking at ourselves first, and then how we are connected to the system.

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**Dr, Greg Borgerding**  
Principal, Glacier Middle School  
White River School District  
[gborgerding@whiteriver.wednet.edu](mailto:gborgerding@whiteriver.wednet.edu)