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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Susan K. Sparks

A Thousand Conversations

“Communication works for those who work at it.” -John Powell

Becoming a PLC involves everyone in the process of change. If principals hope to create the kinds of schools where all children learn to high levels, they must commit to engaging in constant, clear and consistent communication about the big ideas of a PLC. As Mike MacDonald, a principal in Thornton, Colorado reported, “...the task of becoming a PLC requires that principals engage in a thousand individual conversations; each held one at a time.”

Repetition is the Key

The first key to communicating a vision is repetition. John Kotter estimates that leaders routinely *underestimate* how much communication is needed to facilitate change by a factor of 10. The reasons for this miscalculation are many, but failing to engage in constant and continuous communication of the vision is one of the most common mistakes principals make when beginning the process of becoming a PLC.

Principals who are intent on transforming their schools will pay close attention to the advice of Rick DuFour and return to the big ideas of a PLC again and again with “*boorish redundancy*.” DuFour suggests principals look for

frequent opportunities to talk about a Focus on Learning, a Collaborative Culture, and a Results Orientation. Effective principals will use the formal structures of faculty meetings, daily bulletins and post observation conferences to reinforce the basic tenets of professional learning communities. They will also take advantage of informal opportunities to engage teachers in conversations about PLCs over lunch, in the hallways and on the playground.

In today’s classroom, the rapid pace of change is accelerating even more and the sheer volume of information flowing to teachers can be overwhelming. With the staggering number of messages teachers must sort through on a daily basis is it any wonder that articulating a vision once or twice is simply not enough? Consider the unintended consequences that failing to communicate frequently had on one school’s vision for a new model of assessment.

The principal made a conscious decision to move from an assessment system based on proficiency to one based on growth. The new initiative required a number of changes but everything was in place for the first quarter assess-



ments. Teachers were surprised, shocked, even dismayed with the new format of the exams. Their frustration was directed at the principal who was baffled by the amount of anger and angst.

Tension grew and the principal became disillusioned by the teachers' lack of support for his vision of a new approach to assessment. He felt teachers had dismissed his efforts to communicate and blamed the faculty's frustration on a handful of negative resistors. However, when asked *how and when* the new initiative had been communicated, he identified two times; once in a single paragraph of the back-to-school letter and a second time during his opening day faculty meeting.

In truth, teachers had not ignored the announcement. Instead, they were focused on day-to-day information associated with the beginning of the school year. The proposed change in assessment practice—an important and legitimate initiative designed to help teachers and students alike—had been washed away in a torrent of information about the opening of school. While it may seem repetitive, articulating the key components of the vision over and over and over again is critical to success.

A Quest for Clarity

A second key to communicating is a clear and consistent message. Using big words in long sentences buried inside complex paragraphs does not promote effective communication. Instead, it hampers understanding and gets in the way. Pfeffer and Sutton observed, "It is hard enough to explain what a complex idea means when you understand it and others don't. It is impossible when you use terms that sound impressive but you don't really understand what they mean."

The overuse of complex language leads to confusion and is often a sign that the person communicating (either verbally or in writing) doesn't really understand what he or she is trying to say. As Bob Eaker is fond of saying, "...*Making everyday things complicated is commonplace. Making complicated things simple is genius.*" A simple—not simplistic—message can be powerful and this is never more important than when principals are trying to communicate a compelling vision of a PLC for their school.

Celebrating with stories of a faculty and staff's successful efforts to implement the big ideas of a PLC is another way principals can bring clarity to their message. Principals enhance the credibility and consistency of their communication efforts when teachers see a match between the behaviors described in the vision and what is valued in their school. Consider the confusion a principal created when after months of emphasizing the importance of formative assessment and discounting the value of summative data, he

insisted his faculty begin the new school year by spending hours analyzing the results of the previous year's high stakes, end-of-the-year, state mandated summative assessment.

Teachers had grudgingly moved away from their long-standing tradition of participating in Data Days to analyze longitudinal trends in the state's summative test data. Was it any wonder they became confused and frustrated with the mixed message sent when the principal seemingly emphasized and endorsed an assessment practice—the use of summative assessment data—that had been discredited for months before? Modeling behaviors that are consistent with the vision compliments the impact of a clear and concise message.

A Thousand Conversations

While it may seem repetitive, articulating the big ideas of a PLC over and over and over again is critical to success. To borrow a phrase from Kotter, "One conversation here, another conversation there, and the number of times teachers hear the vision really begin to add up." Principals must look for frequent opportunities to communicate the vision.

Principals enhance communication by keeping their message simple, consistent and crystal clear. They model behaviors aligned with the vision and share a message that is concise, free from educational jargon and to the point. The metaphor of the elevator ride is applicable here; if the vision of the school we are working to become cannot be communicated in five minutes or less, it is too long and too vague.

It isn't easy but those working to transform their schools will embrace MacDonald's practice of holding a thousand individual conversations with different teachers, in different settings, at different times. Couple frequent opportunities to communicate with a clear, concise and consistent message and principals can ensure that the vision of becoming a PLC becomes a reality. ■

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Resources

- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Pfeffer, J. & Sutton, R.I. (1999). *Closing the knowing/doing gap*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.