

Get Off Your “But”

“The gap in education between our knowledge base and general practice remains depressingly large. Resistance to change occupies a large part of that gap.” Tom Guskey (2004)

Asked what he thought was the key to getting teachers to embrace the idea of becoming a Professional Learning Community (PLC), Tom Koenigsberger, a nationally recognized science teacher, replied, “People just need to get off their ‘buts’ and start doing something.” Koenigsberger wasn’t encouraging physical activity with his statement, but rather the need for teachers and administrators to stop making excuses and start making changes that ensure all students will learn.

Koenigsberger went on to elaborate on the “yeah, buts”—those who rarely *directly* challenge the idea of becoming a PLC, but who are resisters, nonetheless: “How many times have we heard people say they support PLCs **but** they are too busy, **but** they don’t have enough training, **but** they don’t understand exactly what is expected?”

For teachers and administrators who struggle with the idea of becoming a PLC, there never will be enough trust, enough time, and—no matter how hard we try—enough training. Principals working to transform their schools understand what DuFour meant when he said, “People committed to becoming a PLC will find a way. People committed to the status quo will find an excuse.” Understanding and responding to resisters is an ongoing task for principals.

Understanding the Reasons for Resistance

Broadly defined, resistance is a fearful reaction to change. (Valencia & Killion, 1996) In schools, resistance is a natural response to organizational change that has the potential to impact an individual teacher’s practice. (Friend & Cook, 1996) Kerry Patterson suggests that as individuals change their practice they ask themselves two things. First, is the proposed change worth the effort? And second, will I be successful? Leaving those two questions unanswered invites resistance.

Resistance to change can manifest itself in many ways and when a teacher’s response is “Yeah, but...” it’s helpful for the principal to identify the reason for the

resistance. Jo Ellen Killion offers principals a useful tool when reflecting on resistance in their schools. She suggests teachers can be resistant when they are not convinced the change in practice is a good idea (lack of commitment), or if they lack of the necessary knowledge and skills to feel successful (lack of skills), or if they have a diminished sense of efficacy around the idea (lack of confidence). Whether the reason for resistance is a lack of commitment, a lack of skills, or a lack of confidence, schools functioning as a PLC are uniquely prepared to help teachers be successful.

Responding to Resisters

Principals can address teachers’ lack of commitment by building shared knowledge. What is important at this stage, “is that we first engage staff members in building shared knowledge of certain key assumptions and critical practices and then call upon them to act in accordance with that knowledge.” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, *Learning by Doing*, 2006, p. 39)

It is important to know what you are doing but it is more important to know *why* you are doing it. To implement the big ideas of PLCs successfully,



teachers—working in collaborative teams—need time to “make meaning of their work.” The best way to accomplish this is to provide time for teachers to reflect, discuss, consider, and eventually understand why they do what they do. Indeed, if PLCs are to succeed, a principal must consciously create opportunities for teachers to build the necessary commitment to make continuous improvements in their practice.

When their staff lacks necessary knowledge and skills to be successful, a principal’s charge is to provide specific learning opportunities. In the early stages of implementation, teachers call for more and more training but principals need to be careful. If principals continue to provide *only* training, they risk getting stuck in the process (training) and never get to doing anything differently (results).

Principals need to understand that addressing teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills will not be accomplished with a single inservice program. The knowledge and skills essential to a successful PLC develop through a reflective process. Michael Fullan reinforced this idea when he said, “Capacity building is not just workshops and professional development. It is the daily habit of working together, and you can’t learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and having a mechanism for getting better at it on purpose.”

“One of the key moments occurred when our teachers moved from learning about the work to doing the work,” noted Jeanne Spiller, Staff Development

Coordinator in Kildeer Countryside School District 96. “The focus of staff development shifted from providing training to providing support in areas where teachers needed it the most. And one of the most powerful ways we found to support teachers was to give them time to work together during the school day.” Becoming a PLC is a process of clarification of teachers’ practice through a reflective process.

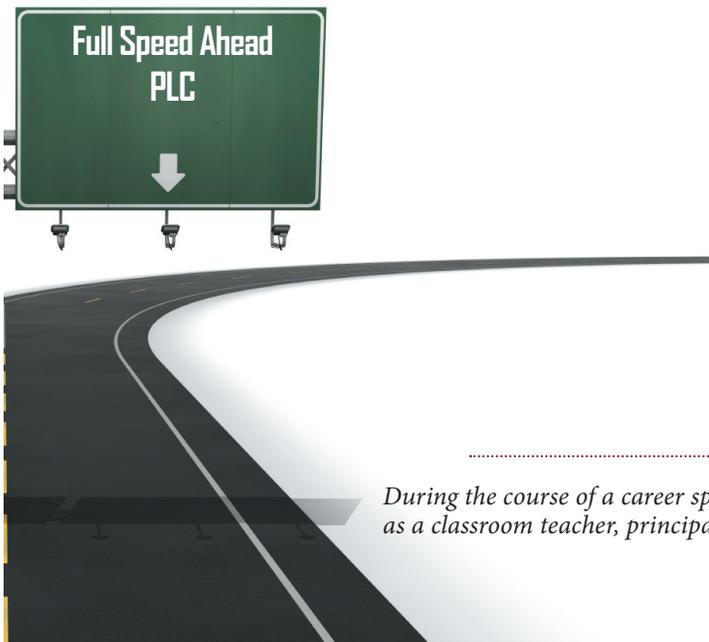
Some resisters don’t believe they *can* be successful in a PLC. Jonathon Kotter makes this point eloquently: “Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible.” He continues, “Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops will never be captured.”

When there is a lack of confidence or a diminished sense of efficacy on the part of teachers, principals can use short-term SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals and celebrate small victories. Ferriter and Norton pointed out “people who are not initially motivated can become strong collaborators as results emerge - usually seeing positive changes in and for their students.” Setting, achieving, and celebrating short-term SMART goals can help convince teachers that becoming a PLC is worth the effort *and* that they can be successful.

Helping Resisters Move Past Their Fears

Perhaps one of the gaps Guskey was referring to at the beginning of this article is nothing more than the 12 inches between our head (what we know) and our heart (what we are willing to do). There will never be a better time to become a PLC than right now. An abundance of research and evidence-based support has created a compelling argument in support of PLCs. As Koenigsberger said, “We know what works, we just need to start doing it!”

By using what works in a PLC as a way to respond to the reasons for resistance, principals can move teachers past their worst fears. Helping teachers understand that becoming a PLC is a journey worth taking and something they can accomplish is the key for principals seeking to move their schools forward. ■



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