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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD and Susan K. Sparks

Focus

A state or condition permitting clear perception and understanding

Teachers on effective and ineffective teams both put forth effort; indeed, teachers on effective and ineffective teams often engage in the very same kind of work. So, why is it that some teams are able to embrace the kind of work that leads to high levels of learning for all while other teams struggle to find their focus? The answer to this question begins with clarity, coherence and precision.

Schools that function as professional learning communities are characterized by an academic focus that brings clarity, coherence, and precision to every classroom.

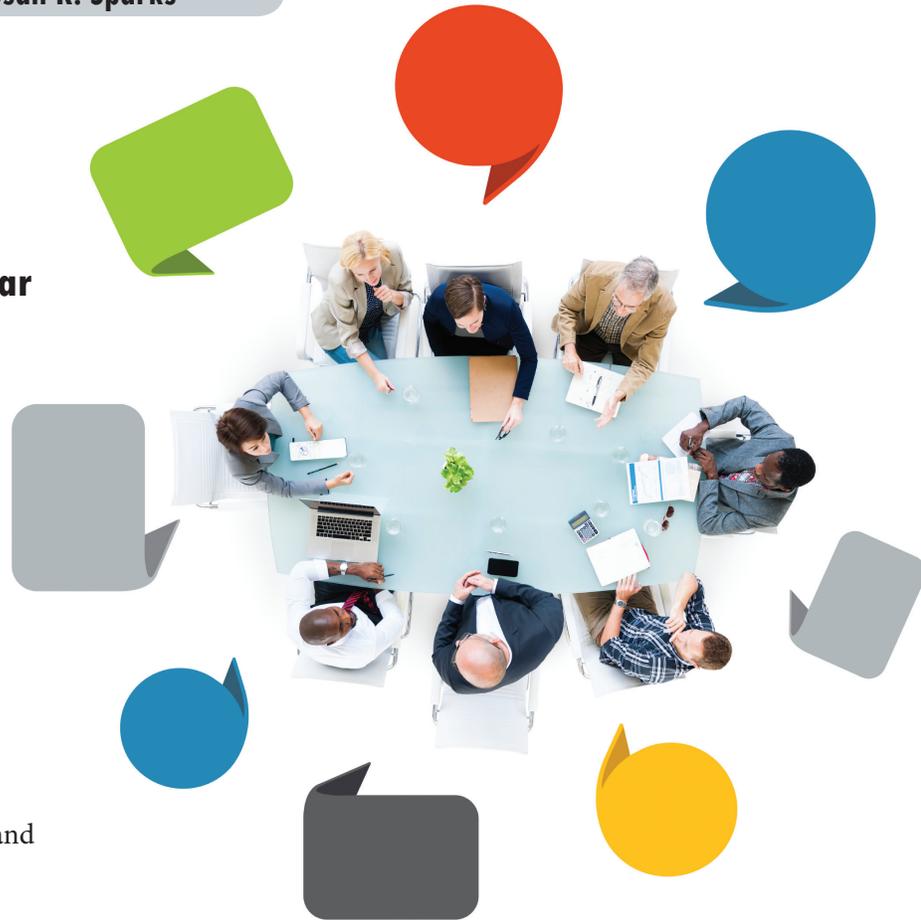
- Jonathon Saphier

One of the key questions teams must answer is, "What will be the focus of our work while we're together?" According to Rick DuFour, "The important question is not 'Are teachers collaborating?' but rather 'What are teachers collaborating about?'" (DuFour et al., p. 91) What has become increasingly clear is that the most effective teams create an unrelenting focus on learning.

Teachers in traditional schools have gathered together for generations. In the best of times, they discuss grading practices and gigabytes. In the worst of times, they struggle through awkward conversations about problems outside of their control. These teams gravitate towards discussions related to teaching and while issues such as dress codes, field trips and tardy policies may be school related, it is not the kind of work DuFour envisioned for highly effective teams.

Contrast this with what teams discuss in high performing PLCs. In these schools, teachers come together to clarify what students should know and be able to do, create common assessments, engage in constructive conversations about data, and design systematic pyramids of intervention for students who need more time and support to learn. These teams focus on learning by concentrating their efforts on responding to the critical questions of learning.

Heather Clifton (2011) provides a good way to determine if schools have the right focus on their teams. Clifton says, "A lot of schools think they're doing PLCs and are happy holding meetings but the work teachers are doing in these meetings does not impact student achievement and thus it cannot be characterized as the work of professional learning communities." She continues, "The definition of what is and is not PLC work is relatively simple; if the work does not



impact student achievement it cannot be characterized as the work of a professional learning community.”

In the most effective schools, teams ask and answer the questions; “What do we want our students to know and be able to do?” “How will we know they have learned it?” “What will we do if they don’t learn it?” and “What will we do when they do learn it?” Let’s examine how some teams use clarity, coherence and precision to create an unrelenting focus on learning.

Effective teams seek clarity around best practice: *The most effective teams create clarity and make meaning of their practice by seeking to understand ‘why’ certain instructional practices are more effective than others.*

Teachers on both effective and ineffective teams talk about issues related to teaching and learning but teachers on effective teams regularly engage in the kind of facilitated dialogue designed to promote the sharing of best practice. These teams gather evidence of student learning and seek out the kind of honest, growth oriented feedback that creates greater clarity.

In contrast, less effective teams favor the kind of polite, superficial conversation that protects adult relationships. Teachers on ineffective teams tolerate random discussions, talk about topics unrelated to improving student learning and sanction the hoarding of best practice.

Effective teams create coherence around their practice: *The most effective teams build coherence and continuously search for deeper levels of understanding around ‘how’ to improve instructional practices in their schools.*

Teachers on both effective and ineffective teams do what is asked of them but teachers on effective teams reject the precedent of past practice and commit to understanding ‘how’ best to improve their practice. Teachers on these teams value collaboration and view meetings as precious opportunities to sharpen their pedagogy and deepen their content knowledge.

Teachers on less effective teams comply with expectations because someone at the school or in the district has required that it be done. These teachers just want to be “left alone” and meetings remain an excruciating exercise in compliant behavior where teachers dutifully attend but

quietly wonder how long it will be until they can return to their classroom, shut the door, and “get back to work!”

Effective teams strive for precision around their practice: *The most effective teams seek to create a high level of precision and clear agreement on ‘what’ instructional practices will promote higher levels of learning in their schools.*

For example, effective and ineffective teams both acknowledge the standards but teachers on effective teams invest time and energy in an organized and purposeful process to determine the essence of what each standard is asking students to learn. These teams work to identify precisely what every child must know and be able to do.

Teachers on less effective teams also acknowledge the standards but engage in erratic and sometimes haphazard procedures to choose which standards to teach. They make (and post) long lists of standards based on personal preferences, the availability of materials, or what is reflected in the District’s pacing guide.

“When you have a very clear focus, you recognize what’s important and all the other stuff becomes not important.”

-Bradley, 1993, pg. 6

Jonathon Saphier’s elegant observation highlights the importance of clarity, coherence and precision in developing the right focus on collaborative teams. As teams engage in the process of continuous improvement together, they seek greater clarity around the ‘why’ behind their instructional practices. As clarity improves, teachers construct deeper levels of coherence about ‘how’ to improve their instructional practice. And finally, as teams achieve higher levels of clarity and coherence, they naturally develop more expertise and become increasingly precise about ‘what’ is the best way to improve their instructional practice. ■



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