

Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD and Susan Sparks

Connoisseurs of Interactive Tools and Strategies How Teams Use Process to Achieve Results



“The process of becoming a PLC is designed to achieve a very specific purpose: to continuously improve the collective capacity of a group to achieve intended results. Therefore, it is incongruous to engage in elements of the process and ignore results.”-DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006)

We couldn't agree more; any process that teams engage in should be purposeful **and** lead to results. We do not support arbitrary process or random activities; process for the sake of process only creates resentment on a team. Instead, we recommend teachers be intentional and use process to improve the productivity of their teams.

The right kinds of process—ones that engage team members in a collective effort to improve their practice—greatly increase the likelihood that teams will reach their goals. We know the best teams are results oriented, but those teams are also mindful of the fact that without a solid grasp of how to use process effectively, they will struggle to achieve the kind of results they seek. Simply put, the key to achieving results is effective process.

“One of the key skills or attributes of a quality principal is expertise in group process.” -John Gooden (1998)

Ensuring that teams use process to achieve their goals is the responsibility of principals and teacher leaders alike

and schools can encourage more effective process in three important ways.

First, teachers benefit from training on how to use process effectively. If we expect teams to use process well, it just makes sense to show them how and develop their capacity to match the right process with the right task. Second, as part of teacher evaluation and performance appraisal, principals should ask individuals to assess the impact of their team's process on improving teaching and learning **and** identify ways they have personally contributed to making that process more effective. Finally, the only way teachers will know that process is valued is for leaders to confront individuals who do not meaningfully engage in process and hold them accountable for their actions.

“Process must match intended outcomes and help you accomplish your goals. Be deliberate and focused on results when determining what process will work best for you.” -Susan Sparks (2008)

There are a variety of interactive tools and strategies teams use to strengthen process on collaborative teams. Most can

be captured under the headings of rituals and routines, interactive tools, interactive activities or protocols. The key is to match the choice with the task at hand.

Rituals and Routines

Teams use rituals and routines to highlight what is important, celebrate what is valued, and provide the encouragement necessary to continue improving. Rituals and routines are also terrific ways to enhance communication and create greater comfort and predictability on teams.

Beginning each meeting with a quick check-in is an example of using rituals and routines effectively. Check-ins can be something as simple as answering a question posed by the team leader or an activity like New Flash or W.H.I.P. (Without Hesitation Invite Participation). A check-in is a good way to ensure that everyone is ready to begin.

Rituals and routines can also be used to honor and celebrate success. Teams often begin meetings with a statement like, “I would like to recognize one of my team mate(s),” followed by two or three sentences specifically describing the good work or extra effort. Using rituals and routines in this way recognizes the importance of celebration.

Another ritual and routine teams find useful is to close each meeting with a quick summary of the work or an answer to the question “What are our next steps?” When used regularly, this technique signals the end of the meeting and reminds everyone what is expected of them.

Interactive Tools

Teams use a variety of tools such as planning templates, data gathering forms and graphic organizers to augment their process. For example, each chapter of *Learning By Doing* concludes with a continuum describing the development of important PLC concepts. Teams use tools like these continuums, and the planning templates that follow, to explore their current reality and identify what next steps the team will take to improve.

When teams have limited time and resources they often rely on a simple form to collect data. Using a single, standardized form to gather everyone’s data in one central place makes teams more efficient and moves teachers from looking at “data from **my** kids” to looking at “data from **our** kids.”

Finally, graphic organizers increase understanding, maximize organization and promote professional learning. Graphic organizers are great tools to link content and show the relationship of past, present and future work. For example, agendas can be written as graphic organizers and help lead teams through their meetings.

Interactive Activities

Interactive activities are designed to promote everyone’s involvement. They are used to gather information, define and clarify problems, generate ideas and possibilities, categorize and narrow options, or prioritize and evaluate alternatives.

Examples of interactive strategies range from something as simple as “turn to a partner” to more sophisticated strategies like a criteria matrix in which teams identify specific criterion or important characteristics, list all the possibilities, and rate each possibility against each criterion. More than anything, interactive activities promote engagement.

Protocols

Protocols are the most powerful interactive strategy teams use to improve their practice. A protocol is a set of agreed-upon guidelines for a conversation about teaching and learning. There are four major categories of protocols and while they share some similarities, protocols in each category serve a different purpose.

We have written extensively about the importance of protocols as a tool to enhance the productivity of teams. Log in to your member profile at www.tepsa.org to read *It’s Not Pixie Dust, It’s Protocols* (TEPSA News, Vol. 67(1) January/February 2010) and *Protocols: A Powerful Prescription for Professional Learning* (TEPSA News, Vol. 70 January/February, 2013) for a lengthier discussion of protocols.

“Process is a method of conducting meetings and engaging participants. It is a series of actions that move teams closer to their goals.”-Susan Sparks (2008)

We believe collaborative teams are most effective when they balance effective process and a strong results orientation. Furthermore, we argue that teams need to be intentional with process. They should consider themselves connoisseurs who collect a variety of interactive tools and strategies and use them to accomplish their goals. Regardless of which they choose; the purpose of process is to engage teams in a cycle of continuous improvement in order to achieve results. ■

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Resources

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
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- Sparks, S. (2008). *The Collaborative Teacher: Creating intentional Collaboration*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Sparks, S. & Many, T. (2015) *How to Cultivate Collaboration in a PLC*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.