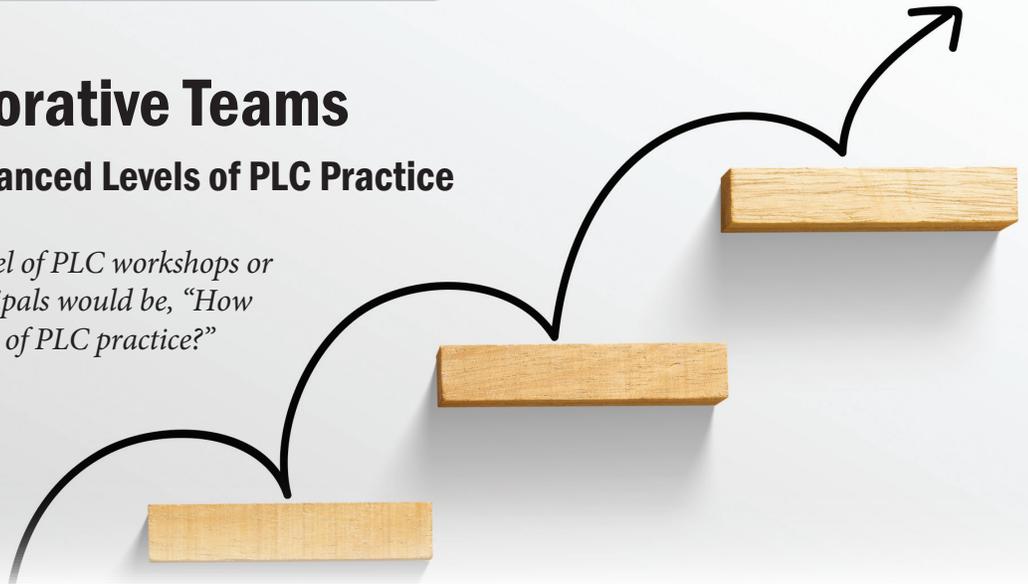


Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD

Coaching Collaborative Teams

Drill Deeper to Achieve Advanced Levels of PLC Practice

Instead of asking about the next level of PLC workshops or training, a better question for principals would be, “How can we move teams to the next level of PLC practice?”



In an effort to improve their schools, principals often ask, “What’s the next level of PLC training?” Or they might say, “My staff is ready for the next generation of PLC workshops.” This kind of thinking reflects the notion advanced training equals advanced content and levels of proficiency, similar to the way Algebra 2 follows Algebra 1, but the truth is there is no PLC2 training. The elements of the PLC process are constant, and while the big ideas and basic tenets don’t change, what does change is the depth at which teams understand, and the fidelity with which they apply the PLC process on their teams and in their schools.

There are no “advanced” levels of PLC training but, the intentional coaching of collaborative teams can “advance” the level of PLC practice.

When asked about ‘advanced’ PLC workshops Rick DuFour always answered, “There are no advanced levels of training; we didn’t hold anything back.” He would continue, “We have shared our best thinking about how to ensure high levels of learning for all; you must now go back to school and do something with what you have learned.” DuFour’s long-time friend and colleague Bob

Eaker also argues there are no advanced levels of PLC training, but Eaker believes teams can move beyond initial levels of implementation to more sophisticated levels of PLC practice.

The author agrees with both DuFour and Eaker; there are no advanced levels of PLC *training*, however, there are advanced levels of PLC *practice*. So, instead of asking about the next level of PLC workshops or training, a better question for principals would be, “How can we move teams to the next level of PLC practice?” For more and more principals, the answer to this question is found in the idea of coaching collaborative teams around improving their professional practice.

Eaker explains that teams in the early stages of the PLC process are focused on “*getting started*” and improve their practice when they begin to “*drill deeper*.” When teams “*get started*,” they focus on putting structures in place. These teams work on things like developing a common language and establishing norms. They might prioritize and unwrap the standards to identify the highest leverage learning targets. Initial steps might also include designing

common assessments, using protocols to facilitate productive data conversations or creating master schedules that allow students to access more time and support without missing direct instruction in another subject. As terrific as all this work might be Eaker suggests improving a team's practice requires teams "*drill deeper*" into the PLC process.

When teams "*drill deeper*" they work on the same big ideas and basic tenets as other teams that are "*getting started*," but as they "*drill deeper*" these teams acquire new insights, confront new questions, and explore new approaches that may promote higher levels of student learning. For example, teams might shift from analyzing scores generated on traditional assessments to using student work to measure learning or move beyond identifying learning targets to developing learning progressions that describe what proficiency would look like for each of the priority standards. These teams are working on the same work but at a deeper and more sophisticated level.

Eaker believes that, just like our students, whether they are just "getting started" or "drilling deeper," not all teams will learn and make adjustments at the same pace and some teams will grow further and faster than others. He explains "*drilling deeper*" can be accomplished by: 1) adding more specificity to the team's practice, 2) monitoring the progress teams are making, and 3) celebrating the team's improvement efforts. Principals accomplish all three of these outcomes when they coach collaborative teams.

Anecdotal Evidence in Support of Coaching Collaborative Teams is Growing

We see it all the time; coached teams are more effective than uncoached teams and schools go further faster when the primary goal of coaching is to help collaborative teams, rather than individual teachers, improve their professional practice. For example, the positive impact of coaching teams was observed during a recent action research project conducted at the elementary level in Macomb County, Michigan. The researcher's purpose was to ascertain the impact coaching teams had on teachers' efforts to improve their instructional practice. The project was based on the assumption that the more teachers reflected on their instructional practices as a team, the more likely those practices would improve.



We see it all the time; coached teams are more effective than uncoached teams and schools go further faster when the primary goal of coaching is to help collaborative teams, rather than individual teachers, improve their professional practice.



To determine whether coaching had any impact, the researcher observed multiple team meetings, some with a coach present and others without a coach present. The researcher collected data on the number of times teams engaged in self-reflection on their own practices—a hallmark of teams moving from "getting started" to "drilling deeper"—and the results were encouraging. When a coach was present in the team meetings observed, teachers reflected on their practice an average of 6.5 times, compared to only 1.6 times when no coach was present. By coaching teams through the PLC process there was an increased likelihood teachers would reflect on their practice thereby increasing the likelihood of improved student achievement.

Eaker makes a persuasive argument in support of coaching collaborative teams, but anecdotal evidence is also beginning to emerge that supports his belief schools can and do continue to improve their PLC practice. The findings from this action research would suggest the best way to advance a team's PLC practice and move them from "*getting started*" to "*drilling deeper*" is to consciously coach collaborative teams around the work of a Professional Learning Community.



Dr. Tom Many is an author and consultant. His career in education spans more than 30 years. 🐦 @tmany96