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Professional Learning Communities at Work

We seek meaning and significance from building purposeful communities. (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xiii).

BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS ■

Clusters of learning communities form a learning organization when an organization, as a whole, commits to learn continually from and about its work. Today many organizations are learning disabled: the norms of the organization inhibit learning from its work. For instance, a school whose professional development program is task-orientated rather than purpose-orientated forces the organization members into a narrow focus, which does not invite continuous growth.

In terms of working with learning communities in schools, there seems to be a direct relationship between success with continuous improvement efforts and a school community in which learning is a valued part of the professional practice and conversations among staff members.

Tom Sergiovanni (1994) suggested that the desire for community is part of human nature and a basic need. He believed that because no cookie-cutter recipe for community building exists, each school will have to invent its own practice of community. Sergiovanni also acknowledged, "[W]e humans seek meaning and significance above all, and building purposeful communities helps us find both" (p. 95).

It seems logical that having such an organization in school communities would be ideal. Educators might even assume that schools already *are* learning communities. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The lack of learning communities might even be a key contributor for the reason why so many school reform efforts have failed. In order to address the urgent needs of our educational process and define the purpose of schooling in the Information Age, we must create an environment where learning *and* constructing new ideas are an expected part of the daily practice of professional educators: a place where all can work together to challenge past practices and work toward a shared purpose defined by professional collaboration and learning.

The teaching profession is being redefined at a rapid rate by the changing needs and purposes of education for today's youngsters and communities. In working with the Teacher Centers in the New York City Public Schools and with other school systems, as a facilitator, I noted that educators are focused on identifying attributes of being a professional educator in the twenty-first century. The educators recognize that if their work is to support and contribute to the growth of the teaching profession in the future, they must consider the essential attributes of a professional teacher.

Working with the professional development portfolio and other frameworks for change, I found the following essential attributes or mind-sets of a professional teacher emerged:

1. *Do no harm.* As a special education teacher, I interviewed students when they entered my program. I would ask, "When did you begin to believe you could not learn in school?" They could *always* tell me. They knew the circumstances, the teacher, and the event that convinced them that "*I cannot be successful here.*"

   As professionals, we must create a learning environment for students that encourages and nurtures whatever level of intelligence or maturity nature has provided them. We must provide a true learning environment of coaching for all of our students no matter where they are able to enter the learning process.

2. *Be an informed visionary.* So often, teachers are asked to adopt another's vision or purpose of schooling. Each teacher *must* have his or her own commitment to the purpose of education and dedication to cultivating and expanding each student's repertoire of understanding. To do this, educators must possess professional skills, know how individuals learn, know how the brain works, and know the critical juncture points of a child's social and emotional development. With that background, professionals can add content and instructional practices that assist students in constructing their own personal understandings and expanding their knowledge.

3. *Inform others.* How many times have you gone to the doctor's office and really appreciated it when the doctor took the time to explain what is happening with your body as well as the anticipated effects of a prescribed treatment? It is the same with the teaching profession. Educators need to inform themselves and their communities of the research, individual discoveries, and professional

experiences that have informed and enlightened their practices. Parents always feel appreciative and more in control when they understand what is happening in the school environment as their children develop.

For example, there is a time in the development of a young child's visual system when reversals of letters might occur when she or he is reading. Usually this lasts for a short period as the brain routes and solidifies new connections. Sometimes reversal of letters is an indicator of a more complex problem such as a perceptional disability or dyslexia. Observation and time will determine whether the exhibited phenomenon is a phase or an indicator of something else. When parents understand this, they are willing to watch and wait with the teacher as they all observe, collaborate, and facilitate the child's developing skills.

4. *Every child is unique.* Educators must always remember that each child presents a new situation. Each child is unique in physical, emotional, social, and intellectual gifts and requires customized attention. This uniqueness celebrates and challenges professional decision making as teachers determine the best materials and practices to maximize learning and development for that child. This uniqueness also explains why "covering the curriculum" does not necessarily mean most students in a class have added to their knowledge base.

These four attributes share the need for continuous professional collaborative research and learning on the part of teachers.

The Nature of a Learning Organization and Learning Communities

A learning organization is not a building that breathes but rather a collection of community members who give life, presence, flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness, new thinking, and energy to their organization and the work it does. A learning organization is a collection of learning communities—small groups organized around individuals' work and shared purposes. The efforts of each learning community within the learning organization contribute to the coevolving, living system (Capra, 1982), which is the learning organization. The organization is dependent on learning communities to sustain it and help it grow. Learning communities infuse new thinking and suggestions for improvement into the organization, which would not exist without the collection of learning communities within the system.

Why Are Learning Communities Needed in Schools?

The breakneck speed of change in the information age has educators reeling and continually adapting and accommodating to the changing needs in our world. Learning communities allow for establishing norms of adjustment to change by continually infusing new thinking and practices into the work and accommodating changes and supporting community

members through transitions. Peter Block (1993) commented, "If there is not transformation inside of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions" (p. 77).

Learning communities invite the conversations, feedback, and risk taking necessary for individual transformation and systemic changes. Altering a structure alone does not necessarily mean systemic change will occur.

For example, faculties in several high schools in California, going through a restructuring process, learned that block scheduling was a structural change that had little impact on student learning if teachers did not change their professional practices. The educators in the decision-making process agreed that the purpose of the block scheduling was to improve student learning by increasing the use of interactive, interdisciplinary practices. It was also agreed that block schedules could consolidate subject matter and help students focus on just a few subjects at a time, deepening their understanding of the concepts embedded in the content. Furthermore, by spending more time with fewer teachers, students would seem to have more opportunities to build a sense of community in class.

As the process for change continued, some of the school faculties chose to vote on whether to have block scheduling. Interestingly enough, those teachers who were forced to participate in the change to block scheduling simply did in ninety minutes what they had always done in forty-five minutes. On reexamination of those classrooms wherein the instructors were forced to implement block scheduling, it was found there was no change in fundamental teaching practices or student outcomes.

Another example of how changes in structures alone will not necessarily make a difference is the decision to use site-based management (SBM), as explored by a group of schools in New York. When shared decision making and SBM schools were considered by a group of district personnel, many of the school principals in the group seemed aligned in theory with the process, but only as long as they still had veto power over decisions. However, teachers who came to the table as part of the process were very much interested in decision-making power regarding hirings and budget allocations. So a roomful of people were negotiating for shared governance. The conversations were not about how student learning could be improved but about power. Participants were operating off an old paradigm and altering the structure did nothing to alter the conditions.

Over time, however, the conversations began to evolve into asking about purpose and about how SBM could help achieve that purpose. The team facilitators began asking questions: What do we need to know about shared decision making? What do *we* want for *our* school? As team members became willing to listen and learn, they began building their understandings and abilities resulting in a change in their attitudes toward the process, thus contributing toward a shared purpose as a school community. Through the process of questioning, individuals had shifted their power and purpose; change was actually achieved in a meaningful way.

Who Is in a Learning Community?

Members of a learning community are individuals with *diverse* philosophies, experiences, expertise, and personalities. Within a school community, learning communities can and do include members inside and

outside the walls of the school building, as shown in Figure 1.1. The community-at-large is responsible for the educational process of youngsters; therefore, building learning communities composed of all parties involved in the educational process is critical. Professional educators come to their work with varying values, skills, knowledge bases, and beliefs. Their first and foremost challenge is to align their needs and purposes with those of the entire community. All learning community members are part of the critical life force of the organization. Their collaborations, interactions, and shared understandings are the life force that energizes and connects individuals and forms cohesive learning communities. Through working together, the individuals recognize their interdependence and the richness in their diversity. Learning communities in schools should include children, educators, parents, business partners, and other organizations in the community that contribute to the schooling process.

One school in southern California was experiencing great divisiveness among staff and community. The community was demanding changes in the school, focusing on staff development practices and the lack of equity in the bussing process. The conversations in parent group meetings became heated and, at times, ugly. The school leadership decided to have a community night and redesign the process of using parent opinions and desires in the decision-making process at the school.

Figure 1.1   Members of the Learning Community Working Toward Change
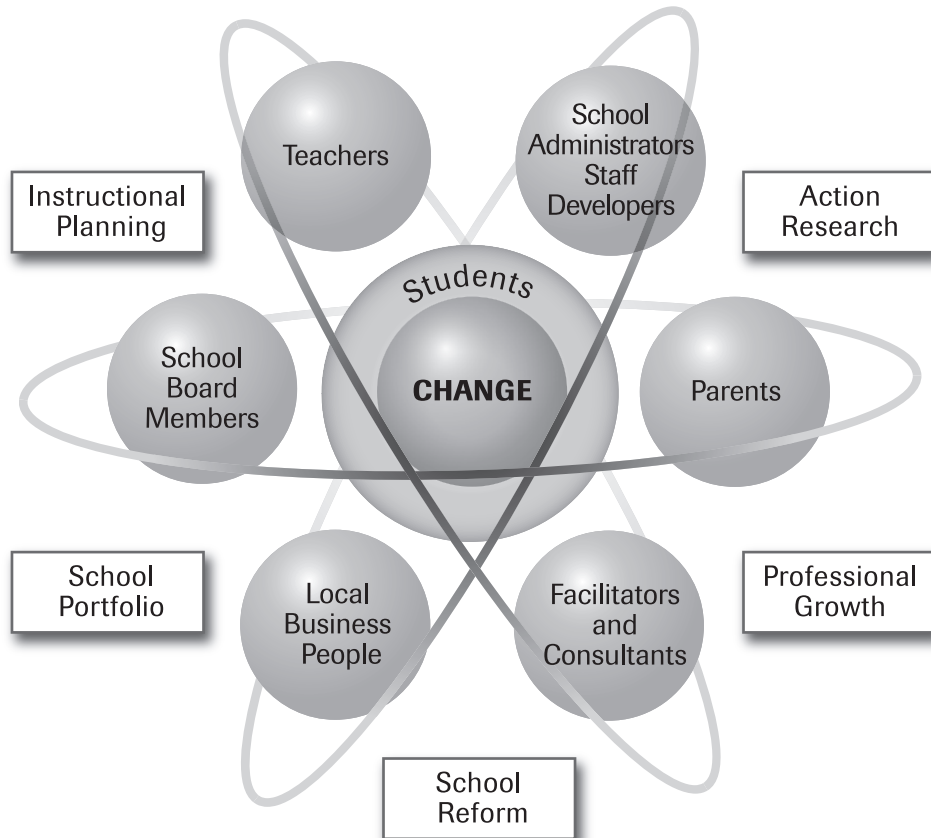
The first step in the process was to reconstruct the history of the school. Community members were invited to join the staff for an evening to tell the story of their school. They recounted changes that had occurred in curriculum, staff, student enrollment, assessments, and physical structures. Working in decade groups, the participants recounted the history of the school from the decade in which it opened to the 1990s. After a representative from each group summarized the highlights of that particular decade, everyone looked for outstanding achievements in which they felt pride. Group participants then discussed what to keep and the lessons that had been learned.

Drawing from the experience of that evening, the group began to set a new purpose and priorities for the school. For each priority, they formed an action team which included a school staff member. Community members were invited to participate on a team that addressed one of their greatest interests or concerns. Several staff members and parents attended facilitation-training sessions and were willing to serve as team facilitators. The action teams met monthly and developed a plan with both short- and long-term goals. The first "community night" meeting was in 1994, and to this day, the learning community process established that night still serves that school community as they work together to address the challenge of educating children.

■   ## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONVERSATION AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Building relationships is at the heart of learning communities. The reciprocal process of *colearning* fuels the continued growth and vitality within the community. Members of a learning community are committed to continually improving their efforts and refining their practices on an ongoing basis. They are willing and able to move out of isolation and engage in collegial (professional) conversations about their work.

School communities as well as communities-at-large are experiencing complex problems that are not easily resolved. Some have referred to these problems as falling into one of two categories: wicked problems and tame problems. Wicked problems are complex and not easily definable. There are no existing algorithms for solving wicked problems, and they are iterative in nature; that is, the problems are recursive and continually evolving. Tame problems, on the other hand, are definable. The boundaries of involvement and areas for intervention appear clear. There are existing algorithms. Today schools and communities are facing greater numbers of wicked problems that are not effectively solved with an easy answer. These problems are multidimensional and self-generating and require continual attention and adaptations (Bailey, 1996).

Members of learning communities put meaning into their work by defining a common purpose and function. The emphasis in a learning community is on building commitment, not on constructing compliant structures. The environment is one of shared responsibility rather than managerial accountability. In these times of wicked problems, there is an increased need to work together and to be open to new ideas and new solutions. When solutions are mandated solutions, forced upon the organization from the outside, there is little possibility for building

commitment for implementation of shared solutions nor for willingness to continually revisit the effectiveness of the mandated solution over time.

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES AND ROLES OF ■
LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

In a learning community, individual members are both *learners* and *leaders* who are willing to suspend assumptions, respect the ideas of others, and engage in dialogue to continually construct and refine their purpose and shared understandings. As members take responsibility for learning and leading together, they build new understandings of leadership and leadership actions. Learning community members are *adaptive, generative,* and *creative* with their practices. They are committed to continually improving their work by engaging in reflective collaborations. They seek new ideas, feedback, and opportunities to reflect and collaborate. Members are leaders who take action to generate new thinking and construct new designs for their work.

Each individual member is an integral part of a dynamic, evolving system. The system as a whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Synergy exists. In a learning community, there is recognition of members' interdependence and a reciprocal process of learning. Each member is committed to infusing new ideas, rethinking existing structures, and reflecting on experiences. As members interact (with people, events, and ideas) and reflect on their experiences, each person contributes to the evolving process of the learning community and its members.

Members of learning communities establish trusting relationships by clearly articulating intentions and purposes. Relationships are formed with respect, honesty, and professional ethics. Collegiality builds among members as they clarify their intentions and identify assumptions to avoid misunderstandings. Members recognize how the flow of information and the dynamics of learning are disrupted when faulty assumptions are made regarding intentions.

Learning communities invite the whole person. Community members nourish and enhance the ongoing cognitive, experiential, and emotional development of learning community members (Dietz, 1994).

This happens through the interactions, trust building, and hard work aimed toward a shared purpose. Structures or frameworks such as action research and school reform groups offer openings to build relationships that invite shared learning.

Ongoing relationships generate energy and cohesiveness in order to facilitate and sustain the learning system's communities. Wheatley (1992) stated that relationships are key in supporting systemic change. She pointed out, "[W]e do not really know who we are until we enter into a relationship with another" (p. 44). It is only during the relationship-building stage that people are challenged to define who they are, what they do, and their contribution to an organization.

Learning communities are formed one conversation at a time, through reflection and interaction with others about their experiences, ideas, and purposes. Members increase their capacity to listen, to dialogue, and to construct new understandings. Increased trust and knowledge of shared purpose enable members to make decisions for the good of the learning

community, which in turn serves the good of individuals. Members recognize the ultimate benefits of finding common ground and respect each other's contribution to achievements.

Members of learning communities work toward agreement of both purpose and actions to fulfill that purpose. Each member assumes leadership roles and takes leadership actions as appropriate (Lambert et al., 1995). Learning communities need members who

- facilitate conversations and decision making;
- acknowledge the history, norms, and pride in the organization;
- support members through the disequilibrium of change;
- accept responsibility for the learning of self and of others in the organization.

Members of learning communities learn from their work and from each other. They welcome opportunities to invent meaningful and purposeful staff development experiences and continually refine their practice. Accepting their responsibility to stay informed about new practices and research that applies to their work, learning community members are mindful of their commitment to improve continually and support each other in redesigning and modifying their professional behaviors.

■ FACILITATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities are groups of individuals who have come together with a shared purpose and agree to construct new understandings…a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (Senge, 1990, p. 14)

Building a sense of community within a group, a learning community starts with relationships and evolves one conversation at a time. Relationships grow when there is a framework or structure for conversation, work, and reflection; when there is a commitment to building the capacity to have meaningful, focused conversations; and when there is a recognition and commitment on the part of members. Building relationships is a critical factor that influences the impact of the group members' learnings on their professional work.

Frameworks for PLC, and the use of the journal process within those frameworks, are helpful in supporting and sustaining learning communities. Following are three examples of how people working together in learning communities can achieve school improvement through such frameworks:

- *Action research.* A group of first-grade teachers study assessment strategies and use their classrooms to evaluate which system will help them best demonstrate student progress.

- *School reform.* A PLC serving as a site leadership team (SLT) meets regularly as a team and periodically with the entire faculty to agree on instructional priorities. The SLT facilitates the process to (1) analyze student data and agree on instructional priorities, (2) determine professional development needs, (3) implement an action plan, and (4) monitor progress.
- *Professional Development for Instructional Priorities.* A PLC or grade level team makes a commitment to review student data and align their professional development with identified instructional priorities. They agree to generate essential questions regarding their current practices and pursue an inquiry process, which leads them to understanding the gaps in their programs and identifying instructional priorities for change. This PLC process informs their decisions regarding professional development priorities for targeting student achievement by implementing new instructional practices. They learn about new instructional practices and programs to address specific instructional needs of students. They monitor progress and make adjustments as indicated.

Members of learning communities build capacity by developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help them grow professionally. Professional development is achieved through experiences with constructivist leadership, knowledge of adult learning, and awareness of constructivist learning theory. Drawn from an understanding of systems, communication abilities, and acceptance of the dynamics of change, facilitation skills are essential to focus and organize a learning community.

Attitudes and attributes that support learning communities include

- respect for diversity of others and willingness to suspend assumptions;
- honor of another's history and respect of cultural norms;
- willingness to seek understanding of others' intentions;
- willingness to listen and learn;
- openness to posing and responding to essential questions;
- recognition of the vital role of learning communities;
- acceptance that certainty is a myth;
- commitment to making learning communities a priority.

Many school systems around the world have begun to assess the condition of their school communities. Teachers within those systems and other school community members, seeking to establish themselves as learning organizations, are looking for a way to begin the process of change. The vision of transforming schools into learning organizations provides a cohesive and agile framework for educators beginning the twenty-first century. Because of this vision, there is a new paradigm for schools: learner-centered instruction, purposeful learning, and continual improvement of professional practices.