Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work


All four authors of Learning by Doing have had extensive experience with both the theory and practicalities of developing professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. They have written about the topic in books and articles, developed PLCs in their own schools and districts, helped other educators establish PLCs, and—finally and significantly—continue to study PLCs and their impact on student learning. Learning by Doing translates what they have learned through these experiences into a useful guide based on a solid base of research and practice.

Most chapters in the book are organized using a common structure, an approach that makes the content easier to understand and apply. For example, the chapters begin with a case study, which is followed by material that addresses five key organizing elements: here’s how, here’s why, assessing your place on the PLC journey, tips for moving forward, and questions to guide the work of your PLC. The case study is also revisited to link the suggestions to real life.

The authors also take care to address PLCs from the perspective of topics important to the work of educators. Examples include:

- Responding when some students don’t learn;
- Building the collaborative culture of a PLC; and
- Creating a results orientation in a PLC.

A chapter that might be particularly helpful to principals addresses “consensus and conflict in a professional learning community.” It first acknowledges conflict as natural. In the authors’ view, “the real strength of a PLC is determined by the response to disagreements … that inevitably occur.” Second, it identifies some specific ways to address conflict and move forward.

A short excerpt from this chapter demonstrates why principals should reflect on the information presented in this book, thinking carefully about the application of the ideas to their own school. In the following excerpt, the authors discuss working with hard-core resisters to change:

"So what is a leader to do when she continues to meet with defiance even though she has listened respectfully, made a good faith effort to find common ground, exhausted every art of persuasion, and prescribed the specific behaviors she expects an individual staff member to demonstrate despite his or her reservations or concerns?... [She] must keep in mind that the goal is not only to bring about change in the resister, but also to communicate priorities throughout the organization. Unwillingness to follow through sends mixed messages about what is important and valued."

Finally, reproducibles that principals could use to guide staff discussions or work on developing a school’s own PLC are included in the book. For example, a sheet titled “Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community” is intended to help staff members focus on clarifying essential learning goals and then monitor student learning. A helpful feature is the inclusion of a CD with these reproducibles.