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# Mountaintop cheers fall flat

A few weeks back, I was copresenting on the challenges of developing professional learning communities. My copresenter started by having participants draw visual metaphors representing their journey toward becoming learning communities.

Tapping into the artistic core that defines most teachers, she touched a nerve. Teams crafted powerful images: sinking ships with panicked teachers grabbing lifeboats hung on the wall papers next to images of lost mountain climbers struggling up impossible peaks. There were ladders riddled by broken rungs, crumbling brick walls, lunches in isolated containers, and football teams facing imposing rows of linebackers.

Talk about disconcerting!

The most interesting thread running through each image was that every group had drawn some sort of “school leader” — principal, instructional coach, superintendent — at the top of their obstacles. Each of the removed figures was cheering the teams through challenges. “You can do it. Just don’t give up!” the figures shouted from distant perches, far from the action.

At first, I laughed at the obvious jabs that teams were taking at leaders who they felt were removed from reality. But the longer I reflect, the more I wonder about the uncomfortable truth in these slightly cynical drawings.

You see, as a classroom teacher in a professional learning community, my work has changed drastically in the past few years. In addition to the traditional grading and planning responsibilities that I’ve always had, I now meet twice a week with colleagues to identify essential objectives, to target struggling learners, and to analyze the results of common assessments. Together, we design systems for collecting data, for regrouping children in need of differentiated instruction, and

for documenting the impact of our work.

And, to be honest, we receive very little practical support from educational professionals working beyond the classroom. No one provides us with templates that we can follow when creating warehouses of learning data or instructional practices. We receive little training in effective strategies for monitoring progress or for spotting learning trends across classes.

Instead, we’re buried in clichés. We’re reminded time and again that, “Together, everyone achieves more” and “Nothing can hold back a determined group of likeminded individuals.” Our impending sainthood is the subject line of dozens of e-mails, and inspirational mouse pads decorate every desk.

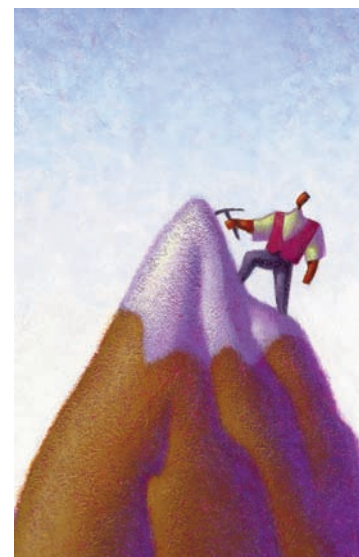
Can you tell that I’m looking for something more?

Accomplished leaders of learning communities roll up their sleeves and sweat a bit to make their buildings work. Principals survey teams at the beginning of every year, identifying needs and publicly marshalling resources to drive change.

Instructional resource teachers create differentiated lessons that teams can easily tailor. Assistant principals cover classes, freeing teachers to work with struggling students; guidance counselors deliver tutoring sessions; and media specialists arrange extension lessons for gifted students.

Commitment levels are high in buildings where this kind of assistance occurs because classroom teachers see concrete evidence that others are willing to invest time and determined effort to guarantee that every child succeeds. No one cheers from the mountaintop, because all are working their way to the summit together.

What does the leadership look like in your learning community? ♦



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