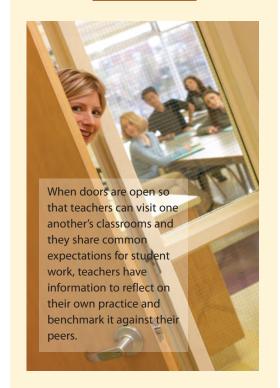# Learning communities can motivate us

Communities of learners share goals and responsibility for student achievement. Members commit to support one another in refining their practice, the success of their students, and their community. Not only do learning communities focus on results for students, they also focus on developing the expertise of team members and expanding their own function as a team.

Successful learning communities depend on more than shared goals, expectations for collaboration, and time to interact.

Members use a cycle of continuous improvement to guide the work of the team. In several cycles throughout the school year, lasting about six to nine weeks, team members:

- Examine data about student achievement;
- Use those data to develop goals for student learning;
- Develop goals for educator learning;
- Design and implement educator learning;
- Move the new practices into classrooms;
- Review student work resulting from the new practices;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of their learning; and
- Repeat the cycle using the most recent data.

In addition to supporting one another's learning, community members also commit to refining their processes for collaborative work and professional interaction. They examine their team operations and establish goals for team effectiveness alongside their goals for student and educator learning. How teams work together influences their capacity to achieve results. Dysfunctional teams have members who compete rather than collaborate, set goals as individual team members rather than shared team goals, and seek individual benefits rather than team benefits. When teams solidify their development, their operations become more refined

NSDC STANDARD

When doors are open so that teachers can visit one another's classrooms and they share common expectations for student work, teachers have information to reflect on their own practice and benchmark it against their peers.

Learning communities: Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.

and their potential for results increases.

In his recent book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,* Daniel Pink describes three motivators that move people to achieve — autonomy, mastery, and purpose. These three motivators are inherent in successful learning teams.

Autonomy

Autonomy is the freedom to be creative, innovative, and solve problems of practice. It generates

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Determine how well your team motivates its members. See NSDC tool on p. 8.

For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see www.nsdc.org/ standards/ index.cfm

motivation because those who are given autonomy feel trusted and valued. Autonomy increases sense of self worth and commitment to the work. Micromanagement or reducing the work to low-level cognitive tasks impedes motivation and results.

Working with autonomy does not mean working solo. When learning teams come together, they define their common areas of focus, the challenges they want to address, and data-driven needs that emerge for analysis of student data. They work collaboratively to identify what they want to learn in order increase student performance. When they use professional judgment and link their focus area to the complex challenges they face in their daily work, team members heighten their autonomy. Team members operate within parameters that are often set by district and school goals and available resources. Yet, they are given the opportunity to exercise professionalism, make decisions related to their learning, reflect on and evaluate their practice, and hold one another accountable for success. For example, when faced with students who learn differently, a learning community experiences autonomy when its members define clear goals, read studies about what others have done to address situations like theirs, and invent their own approach to the challenge. Their autonomy cements their collective responsibility for student and team member success.

Mastery

Mastery, as Pink defines it, refers to a sense of confidence about one's ability to take action, the quality of one's preparation or readiness, and the certainty with which one acts. When people believe they know what to do and feel competent to do what is required, they are more motivated. In learning teams, members contribute to each other's mastery and have opportunities to refine their own mastery. Regular, clear, and specific feedback on one's practice, driven by evidence from student assessments or other forms of student work, increases awareness, an essential first step in improving practice. When doors are open so that teachers can visit one another's classrooms and they share common expectations for student work, teachers have information to reflect on their own

practice and benchmark it against their peers.

Working in isolation provides no referent for the quality of one's work. Without comparison to a standard or to others, it is difficult to conduct a genuine assessment of one's competence. Having opportunities to compare practices or the results of one's practice, as when learning community members examine student work, gives teachers a point of reference to assess their own work and to learn about their strengths and those of their colleagues.

Learning communities enhance mastery. Together teachers deepen their skillfulness and learn how to adapt to meet the needs of students with a wide range of learning needs. By sharing successes, creating strategies to address challenges, and reflecting on the effectiveness of their work, community members refine their own skillfulness and extend and expand their practices, thereby increasing their mastery.

Purpose

Purpose motivates people when they contribute to something larger than themselves, something that has meaning to them and others, and something that they value. People want to make a difference. They want to leave a mark.

Teachers have purpose. They want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Many view teaching as a vocation rather than a job. In learning communities, teachers have significant purpose as they strive to increase student achievement. Their work is focused on ensuring that all students succeed. When teachers expand the reach of their work beyond their own classrooms, their sense of purpose increases. The broader the reach, the stronger teachers' purpose is. Some teachers demonstrate their purpose drive by assuming additional responsibilities within their schools; tutoring students outside class who need extra help; contributing to their communities; serving on or leading committees and task forces within their schools or districts; or serving as mentors, coaches, or teacher leaders. As teachers' mastery grows, their sense of purpose increases.

When teachers share common goals and contribute to one another's learning and instructional mastery, they are driven by a strong sense of purpose to impact student learning within their teams

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and schoolwide. When teams are trusted to focus their attention on their students' most critical areas of need, their sense of autonomy increases. As learning community members share decisions related to instruction and examine evidence of the effect of their instruction on student learning, their mastery of instruction increases. Membership in learning communities motivates members to share responsibility for increasing student learning and generates professional and personal satisfaction for their work.

Reference:

Pink, D.H. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* New York: Penguin. ◆