

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Inside

SPECIAL PULLOUT: Use the PLC Learning Game to discuss community essentials and roadblocks. See pp. 3-6.

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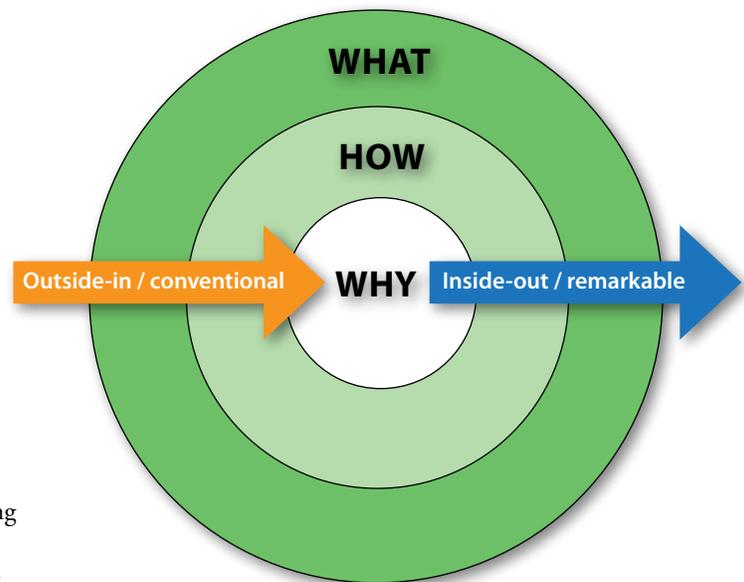
The *why*, *how*, and *what* of professional learning

By Lois Brown Easton

Educators often engage in professional learning and professional learning communities that are focused on *what* educators want to do to improve education. They go to workshops and then collaborate to implement the *what*, which may be the latest and worthwhile curriculum technique, or a new and valuable instructional strategy. However, beginning with *what* they want to do may not be the best way to engage in professional learning or connect with colleagues in a professional learning community.

REVERSE THE ORDER OF *WHAT*, *HOW*, AND *WHY*

Simon Sinek, a strategic communication specialist, presented “How Great Leaders Inspire Action” at the 2009 TED conference in Monterey, Calif. In this talk, he speculated that leaders with promising ideas or products may fail to see them implemented because they begin with *what* they are doing when they communicate about the idea or product to others. These leaders may also try to influence others with great information about *how* something works, but they seldom clarify *why* something is needed. He noted in his talk, “A few years ago, I discovered something that changed my life, a pattern that I found in all the great leaders (individuals and companies). They all think in the same way, and it’s the opposite of everybody else” (Sinek, 2009).



Everybody else, he elaborated, thought of innovation and change in the order of *what*, then *how*, and finally — if at all — *why*. The opposite order, he suggested, is called the Golden Circle (see graphic above).

Sinek proposed that leaders begin with *why* first, then address *how*, and, finally, *what*. His primary example is the approach that Apple takes with its products, first addressing *why* people might want something Apple produces (because it makes them seem cool, avant-garde, and savvy); then examining *how* a product makes people seem cool and avant-garde (design, functionality, and leading-edge technology); and then — finally — *what* the product is.

Sinek correlates the inside-out approach of *why-how-what* to brain function: “When we communicate from the inside out, we’re talking directly to the part of the brain that controls behavior, and then we allow people to rationalize it with the tangible things we say and do” (Sinek, 2009). The desire to change needs to precede *how* and *what* we do to make change.

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Continued from p. 1

When leaders start with *what* they should be doing, they are less likely to engage people at a level deep enough to sustain the hard work of making change. In education, unfortunately, leaders often start with *what*. They announce that they have found something that will substantially change education. It might be block scheduling, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, small schools, or the latest instructional technique for teaching mathematics — all worthwhile things to do. As part of professional development, teachers are told to implement whatever it is, and, voilà, they'll see miracles in the classroom.

Educators may even like what they are implementing, but their enthusiasm may be diminished when they encounter roadblocks on the way to situating the innovation in everyday practice. They may also be unprepared for the complexity of the innovation and the effect of implementing it on the whole system. Without a strong commitment to *why* the innovation is necessary — and without knowing why it works and with whom — educators sometimes give up on change.

Sadly, educators are not usually offered the opportunity to discover the *what* themselves, after first understanding *why* they need to make change and *how* they want the change process to work. As a result, they may expect to be told *what* to do. I first noticed this when working with a district on forming learning communities. A teacher leader asked me point-

blank, "But what are we supposed to do?" When I responded, "You are supposed to learn what students and adults in your school need to thrive and then act upon your learning," he was befuddled. In his experience, learning communities (and, before them, task forces, committees, and teams) were the way the district and school wanted educators to implement something that came from the outside.

Similar experiences with other budding learning communities made me a firm advocate of starting with *why*, as Sinek suggests. Educators need to know *why* they need to change the school experience for students. As they think about why they might want to do something to improve learning for all students, they might attend to *how* they want to work, and then look for *what* they want to do, which might be block scheduling, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, small schools, the latest instructional technique for teaching mathematics, or something entirely unexpected. They may end up at the same point, but by starting with *why*, they have greater commitment to and understanding of *what* they are doing and *how* they are supposed to do it.

ESTABLISH WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

The key to *why* is information. A professional learning community that starts by collecting information about what

Continued on p. 7

THE PLC LEARNING GAME

The board game on pp. 3-6 further illustrates the Golden Circle way of making change. Many of the actions described in the game board spaces and the situations on the chance cards have a *why* and *how* focus. They don't address the *what* part of the circle because the *what* is contextual and based on a school's *why* and *how*.

Play the game with colleagues and read aloud the actions and the situations you encounter. Afterwards, you may want to discuss the particulars. For example, you might want to address these issues:

- Why the second (project implementation) and third (mandated structure and purpose) pathways are not particularly good for learning.
- Why crafting vision and mission may get in the way of making important changes in schools.
- Why identifying beliefs, purposes, and passions are important for making substantive change.
- Why educators might want to engage in data analysis, not just consider data summaries.
- Why working agreements (sometimes called norms) are important.
- How developing strategic plans is less important than developing first steps.
- How building relationships, creating trust, and attending to individual and group needs are important in collaborative work.
- Why shared leadership is necessary in professional learning communities.
- Why educators need to know something about change processes.
- Why cultural changes are as important as changes in the classroom.
- Why long-range outcomes and short-term results are so important in the change process.
- What the planning-implementation gap is and how to cross the gap.
- Why celebrations are important.
- Why protocols are good ways for engaging educators in substantive discussion.
- How to deal with resistance and conflict.
- What the roles of administrators are and how decisions are made.
- Why reinventing the wheel is sometimes necessary.
- Why implementation must reach the classroom level and involve everybody in opening up their classrooms and sharing their own and student work.

THE PLC LEARNING GAME

By Lois Brown Easton

This game illustrates Simon Sinek's (2009) Golden Circle way of making change (see p. 1). Many of the actions that are described in the game board spaces and chance cards have a *why* and *how* focus. They don't address the *what* part of the circle, of course, because the *what* is contextual and based on a school's *why* and *how*.

Play the game with colleagues and, as you play, read aloud the actions and the situations you encounter before moving your marker. Afterwards, you may want to discuss the particulars (see p. 2 for discussion prompts).

DIRECTIONS

Before the game

- Make enough game boards for groups of 3-5 players.
- Get one die for each group.
- Get one place holder for each player (buttons do nicely).
- Make a set of the CHANCE! cards for each group.

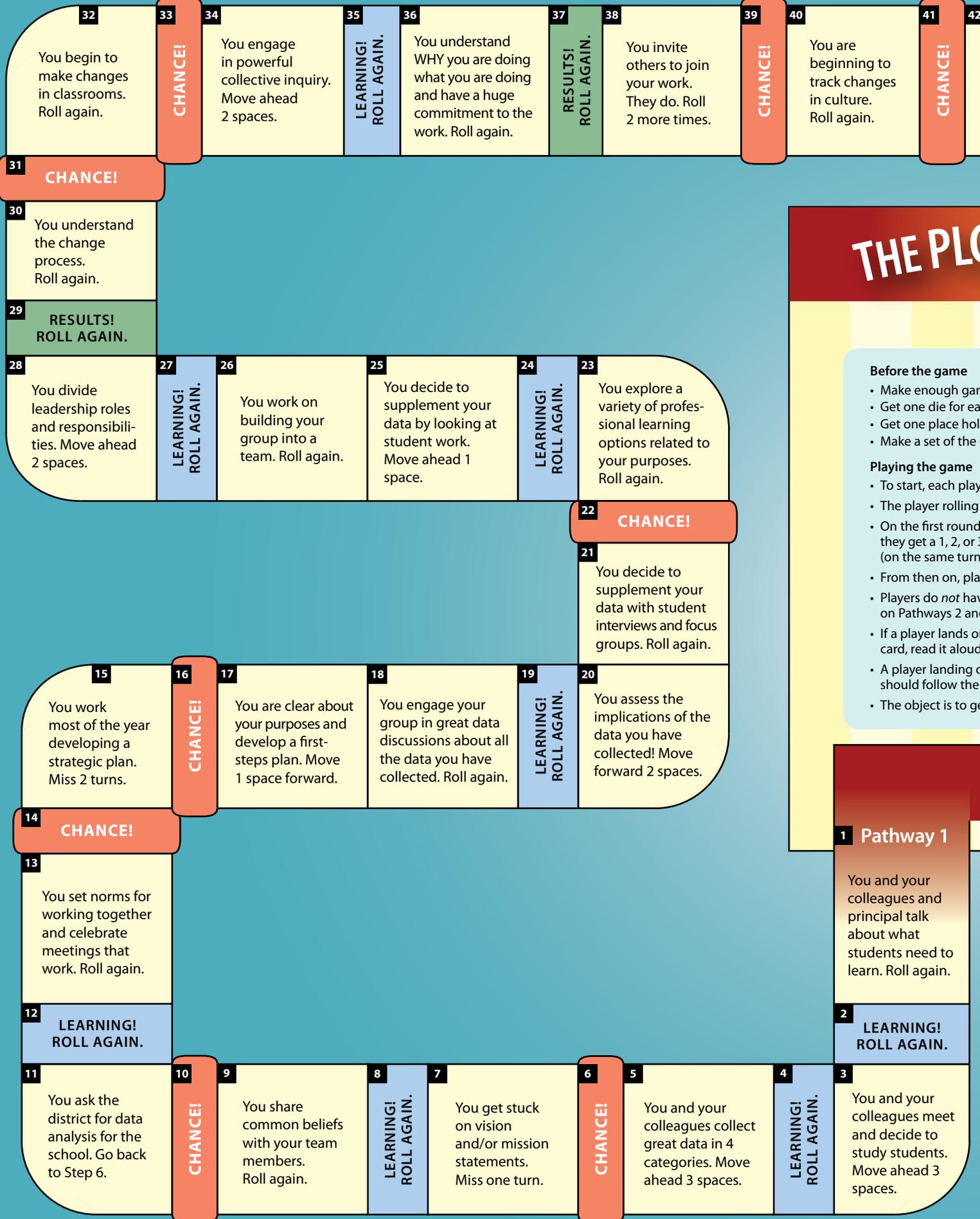
Playing the game

- To start, each player should roll one die.
- The player rolling the highest number on the die should go first.
- On the first round, players select a pathway by rolling the die until they get a 1, 2, or 3. Once a pathway is determined, players roll again (on the same turn) and move the corresponding number of spaces.
- From then on, players should roll and move the number on the die.
- Players do not have to roll the exact amount to get to the last space on Pathways 2 and 3 or to reach EFFECTIVENESS.
- If a player lands on a CHANCE! square, the player should draw a card, read it aloud, and follow the directions.
- A player landing on the LEARNING! and the RESULTS! squares should follow the directions.
- The object is to get to EFFECTIVENESS first!



Learn to play and
play to learn...

TOOL



THE PLAY

Before the game

- Make enough game cards for each player.
- Get one die for each player.
- Get one place holder for each player.
- Make a set of the game cards.

Playing the game

- To start, each player rolls the die.
- The player rolling the die moves their token to the starting space.
- On the first round, each player rolls the die and moves their token to the space corresponding to the number rolled (on the same turn).
- From then on, players take turns rolling the die and moving their token.
- Players do *not* have to move their token on Pathways 2 and 3.
- If a player lands on a chance card, read it aloud.
- A player landing on a learning card should follow the instructions on the card.
- The object is to get to the end of the path.

1 Pathway 1

You and your colleagues and principal talk about what students need to learn. Roll again.

2 LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

You and your colleagues meet and decide to study students. Move ahead 3 spaces.

PLC LEARNING GAME

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DIRECTIONS

Use the boards for groups of 3-5 players. Each group needs one die. Order for each player (buttons do nicely). CHANCE! cards for each group. Each player should roll one die. The player who rolls the highest number on the die should go first. On each turn, players select a pathway by rolling the die until they reach a square numbered 1-3. Once a pathway is determined, players roll again and move the corresponding number of spaces. Players should roll and move the number on the die. The player who reaches the last space on the board should roll the exact amount to get to the last space on the board (3 or to reach EFFECTIVENESS). On a CHANCE! square, the player should draw a card, and follow the directions. On the LEARNING! and the RESULTS! squares, the player should move to EFFECTIVENESS first!

START

2A Pathway 2

You are given a project to implement by the district or school. Lose 1 turn.

3A Pathway 3

You are mandated to start PLCs. Skip 1 turn.

2B CHANCE!

2C

You meet to manage your project. Lose 1 turn.

2D

LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

2E

CHANCE!

2F

LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

2G

RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

2H

You finish your project and decide to continue to work together but with a focus on student needs. Go to the first space on Pathway 1.

3B

CHANCE!

3C

You are told what to do in PLCs. Skip 1 turn.

3D

CHANCE!

3E

You work with your colleagues to decide what to do in PLCs. Go to the first space on Pathway 1.

3F

LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

3G

You, your principal, and your colleagues like the idea of PLCs, so you continue them yourselves. Go to the first space on Pathway 1.

49 CHANCE!

50
You are beginning to see schoolwide changes. Move ahead 5 spaces.

51
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

52
You use a variety of protocols to enhance learning in your group. Roll again.

53
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

54
CHANCE!

55
You regularly celebrate progress and results. Move ahead 2 spaces.

56
CHANCE!

57
You collect and analyze student work to check progress on your goals. Move ahead 1 space.

63
CHANCE!

62
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

61
News of what you are doing spreads throughout your school and into other schools. Congratulations! Move ahead 1 space.

60
CHANCE!

59
You are beginning to see changes in student achievement. Move ahead 2 spaces.

58
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

47
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

48
You practice dialogue and discussion. Move ahead 3 spaces.

46
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

You monitor changes regularly and report results. Move ahead 2 spaces.

43
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

44
You communicate what you are doing in a variety of ways. Roll again.

45
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

You are beginning to see changes in what teachers do in classrooms. Roll again.

64
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

You initiate peer coaching because you know it aids implementation. Roll again.

66
LEARNING! ROLL AGAIN.

65
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.

67
RESULTS! ROLL AGAIN.



Below are the CHANCE! cards to use with The PLC Learning Game featured in Learning Forward's *Tools for Learning Schools* (2012, Spring).

Make a copy of this page to cut out the cards.

<p>Some teachers resist working with you. Go ahead and do good work, hoping to entice them. Move ahead 1 space.</p>	<p>Some teachers resist working with you. Decide you can't move ahead until everyone is compelled to work with you. Lose 2 turns.</p>	<p>Your administrator wants to dictate the agenda and projects of the meeting. Lose 1 turn.</p>
<p>Make all the decisions for the school in your group. Announce these to the faculty at a faculty meeting. Go back to Start.</p>	<p>The group knows the power of talk about teaching and learning and has a repertoire of strategies, including visual dialogue, dialogue, gallery tours, protocols, and other ways to engage others in talk. Move ahead 1 space.</p>	<p>Understand that sometimes it is important to reinvent the wheel (or at least make a given wheel fit your car). Move ahead 2 spaces.</p>
<p>You do not attend to individual and group needs and the team starts to wither and die. Lose 1 turn.</p>	<p>You help everyone in your group understand individual meeting preferences and styles and, together, analyze the capacity of the group to work together. Roll again.</p>	<p>You maintain your PLC as an exclusive group. Lose 1 turn.</p>
<p>Members of your PLC are representative of certain grade levels, subjects, or departments and feel obligated to "protect" their constituencies. Lose 1 turn.</p>	<p>You build trust and attend to the stages of change. Roll again.</p>	<p>You know how to go from planning to implementation (crossing the "implementation gap"). Roll again.</p>
<p>You engage people in processing what they are doing on an individual and group level. Roll again.</p>	<p>Your group understands the importance of context but decides not to wait until the context is perfect before implementing important changes. Roll again.</p>	<p>You experience conflict in your group and don't know how to use and resolve it. Lose a turn.</p>
<p>You experience conflict in your group but decide to ignore it. It will probably go away. Lose 2 turns.</p>	<p>You get bogged down in crafting mission, vision, and a strategic plan for most of your first year. No one wants to be a part of the work in year two. Go back to Start.</p>	<p>Your group understands that the school must have powerful reasons for making change and that they can't start with <i>what</i> to change until they know <i>why</i> they must change. Roll again.</p>
<p>The group understands that sometimes it must "go slow to go fast" and proceeds accordingly. Move ahead 1 space.</p>	<p>The group understands how decisions are made and who makes them. Roll again.</p>	<p>The group uses a consensus process to reach decisions, respecting the opinion of those who initially dissent and working to help shape an idea until it gains consensus. Roll again.</p>

<p>The group understands the importance of what the school is presently doing that led to its current achievement data. Thus, it makes part of data collection an analysis of current context and activities for learning. Move ahead 2 spaces.</p>	<p>The group understands that professional learning is part of any process of making change to improve student learning. Roll again.</p>	<p>The group uses protocols to help guide dialogue and dig deeper into issues. Roll again.</p>
<p>The group fails to find a sponsor or champion at the district level. Lose 1 turn.</p>	<p>The principal understands the importance of the change process and professional development so well that he/she reallocates meeting time so the change group can work. Roll again.</p>	<p>People in the group are wary of individual differences and the dialogue stalls in pseudo-community, never addressing how individuals work together in teams. Lose 1 turn.</p>
<p>Everyone in the school considers professional learning and continuous school improvement as integral to their professional responsibility and responds accordingly. Shout "hurrah" and move ahead 2 spaces.</p>	<p>The group hits a roadblock, and people want to disband rather than work through it together. Stay where you are; that's natural!</p>	<p>The group's meetings are productive, interesting, filled with learning, and compelling. Other people want to join the group. Move ahead 1.</p>
<p>Implementation of something new starts somewhere (maybe not where people predicted it would start) but it is the right change at the right time for the right people. Cheer and roll again.</p>	<p>Even though the group doesn't implement something immediately, changes start happening in the school because the culture is influenced by the group's work. Move ahead 1 space.</p>	<p>The principal is being transferred to another school, and there is no plan in place to replace him/her. The group goes into a tailspin. Lose 2 turns.</p>
<p>The principal is being transferred to another school, but he/she has built a shared leadership governance structure, and the group goes on as it always has, looking forward to welcoming a new principal into their work. Roll again.</p>	<p>The adult and student culture is one of blame and shame. No one addresses the need to shift the culture. Lose 2 turns.</p>	<p>The students are involved in the change process from the start – through surveys, interviews, and focus groups; also, through regular reports to the students and involvement in key meetings. Move ahead 2 spaces.</p>
<p>The group has a regular process for taking stock and reporting to people how the work is going. Roll again.</p>	<p>The group makes communication a priority and consistently and effectively lets everyone know what's going on, all the time (emails can be deleted, after all). Roll again.</p>	<p>One person consistently objects to whatever is going on. The group has no way of dealing with this person, who dominates the process and restricts progress. Lose 1 turn.</p>
<p>The classroom is sacrosanct. Hands-off. The faculty believes that the school can mess around with everything "except what goes on in my classroom, between my students and me." Lose 1 turn.</p>	<p>The PLC effort begins to spread like an epidemic (a good one), and more people want to join and work together on behalf of student learning. Murmur a quiet "hip-hip-hooray" and take another turn.</p>	<p>The group knows that coaching is the most powerful structure to take a school from planning and learning to doing and changing students for the better. Take another turn.</p>

Continued from p. 2

is happening in the school and then asks these questions will likely be able to sustain an innovation:

- What do we know? What do our data tell us?
- Are we satisfied with what we have learned about our students academically, socially, and personally? Is their status quo good enough for us?
- If not, are we willing to make change in some way?

Eventually, answering these *why* questions will lead to answering the *how* and *what* questions. Margaret Wheatley, an expert on leadership and self-organizing systems, summarizes this process: “We see a need. We join with others. We find the necessary information or resources. We respond creatively, quickly. We create a solution that works” (1992, p. 37).

Suzanne Bailey, a systems thinker, speaks of this quest for *why* as identification of the “pain in the system.” Educators need to identify the pain in their schools. What’s not working? What’s not good enough? Is it OK that certain students fail or drop out? Are we satisfied with 53% reading at grade level? Can we live with students’ passivity rather than engagement in learning? At this point, learning communities are not looking for solutions, just identification of *why* they might engage in the challenging proposition of changing how the system works.

Sometimes, members of a learning community will decide that they need more information than they originally collected. Perhaps they will venture into interviews or focus groups, such as a dessert night with parents; a discussion with fellow educators from both sending and receiving schools; or a focus group with students, led by students. Perhaps they’ll invite the whole faculty to use a planning day to assess student work together. Perhaps they’ll even talk directly to students about their learning experiences formally through an interview process or by informally “hanging out.”

Shared beliefs, common purposes, and focused passion emerge from delving into *why*.

DETERMINE HOW BY LEARNING ABOUT THOSE INVOLVED

People in learning communities will also deliberate about *how* they want to make change. Perhaps they’ll want a design team (Easton, 2011, pp. 35-36), or an outside consultant or facilitator. They might want to learn the norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, pp. 37-49), or they might want to learn dialogue. They’ll want to learn about the change process and each person’s learning preferences. They may want to read an illuminating book together or shadow students or visit other schools. They may want to visit classrooms in their own school or share teacher or student work, which is the challenging process of deprivatizing education and promoting learning. They may want to use any number of powerful designs or protocols (Easton, 2008, 2009).

Ultimately, work on *how* requires attention to the people engaged in change: who they are, what they need, how they will be affected, and how they will work together. Margaret Wheatley suggests we learn to facilitate processes and groups, build relationships, and improve our listening and communicating, “because these are the talents that build strong relationships” (1992, p. 38).

Wheatley then cites a conversation with a friend who said, “Power in organizations is the capacity generated by relationships” (pp. 8-39).

FIND WHAT AFTER FINDING WHY AND HOW

Eventually, it will be clear to people in professional learning communities *what* they need to do.

They will know both *why* they need to take the steps they have identified and *how* they want to engage in the work. They’ll be informed and persuasive advocates for their own work. As Sinek said, “If you don’t know why you do what you do, then how will you ever get someone to buy into it, and be loyal, or want to be a part of what it is that you do?” (2009).

The roadblocks that come with change? They won’t go away, but they’ll be manageable because the change leaders know *why* they are doing *what* they are doing and why it works. When stuck — as will invariably happen — leaders will be able to go back to the origin of the work. Their reference points will always be the young people for whom they’re making changes in the system.

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