

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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

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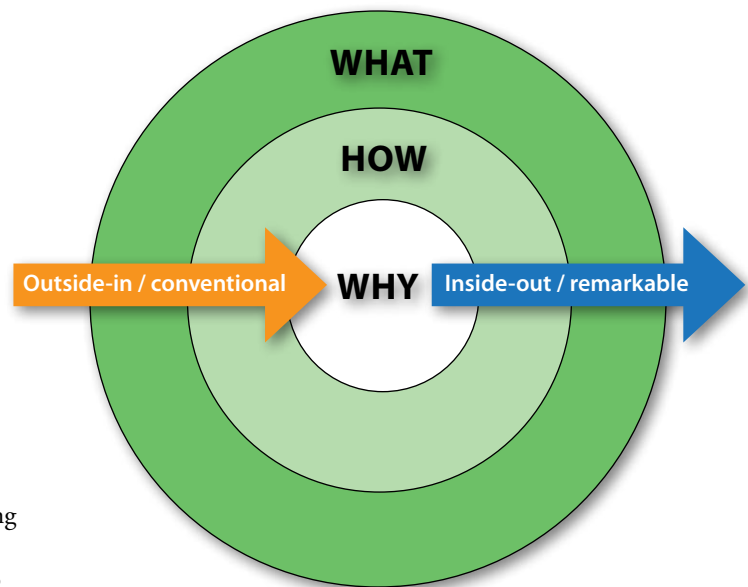
The *why*, *how*, and *what* of professional learning

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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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

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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.

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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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