GIVE TEAMS
a RUNNING START

TAKE STEPS TO BUILD SHARED VISION, TRUST, AND COLLABORATION SKILLS

By Jane A.G. Kise

When an educator tells me, "We're doing professional learning communities this year," that phrasing makes me wonder whether they're simply forming new small groups or undertaking the multiyear effort it takes to move teachers from working as individuals to the deep collaboration that marks effective, sustainable professional learning communities.

Consider for a moment how launching a professional learning community is similar to starting a race. Athletes know the danger of false starts — moving before the starting signal. Until recently, a false start meant that all racers returned to the blocks to begin again, their adrenalin gone, their concentration broken. Because these effects could influence race results, the rules changed. Races continue, and competitors who false start learn only at the end that they've been disqualified.

When professional learning communities have a false start, no one blows a whistle, but members' initial energy for collaboration can dissipate when they run into

all-too-common barriers such as lack of clarity around vision and purpose, trust issues, or insufficient time available for the scope of the undertaking, to name a few. These barriers to effective collaboration are real, yet school leaders who aren't aware of the multistage nature of professional learning community initiatives often launch them before working to remove these impediments.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010) point out that "organizations that take the plunge and actually begin *doing* the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years *preparing* to become PLCs through reading or even training" (p. 10). Targeting three key barriers — lack of shared vision, trust, and collaboration skills — can remove hurdles while at the same time beginning, or re-energizing, the work of professional learning communities.

ENERGIZE PERSONAL VISION AND BELIEF

First, leaders must work to ensure that every professional learning community member sees the value of time spent in these meetings, avoiding the false start of setting an ineffective vision. From their longitudinal study of more than one million leaders, Kouzes and Posner (2010) found that top-down visions seldom energize change efforts. "Leaders must be able to sense the purpose in others. What people really want to hear is not the leader's vision. They want to hear about how their own aspirations will be met. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be realized. They want to see themselves in the picture of the future that the leader is painting. The very best leaders understand that it's about inspiring a *shared* vision, not about selling their own idiosyncratic views of the world" (p. 68).

Yes, it takes time for professional learning community members to reach consensus around a vision, but doing so can make the difference between teachers believing that collaboration is key to student achievement or seeing no value in professional learning communities.

The vision process begins with school leadership. At one school I worked with, the professional learning community leadership team, including several teachers, set the following parameters:

- Professional learning community teams will collaborate on looking at data and/or student work.
- Professional learning community team initiatives will tie to the year's professional development emphasis of improving student achievement by increasing critical thinking.

These parameters ensured a consistent schoolwide focus but allowed teams to concentrate on their unique interests and concerns. For example, the mathematics team was frustrated by how quickly students gave up when given word problems.

Their vision involved turning students into "persistent problem solvers" when assigned rigorous tasks. Other teams focused on asking more rigorous questions, critical thinking in assessments, and other variations on the overall vision.

While involving *everyone* in creating a vision may seem cumbersome, here is one method leaders can use.

1. Ask each professional learning community team to use the parameters leadership sets out to craft the team's vision. To do so:
    a. Cut flip chart paper into long strips and give one to each team member. Each person drafts a statement on his or her strip with a marker so that it can be read from a few feet away.
    b. When all team members have finished, place all the strips on a table or tape them to a wall where everyone can read them. Hold a discussion regarding themes, similarities, and differences, using prompts designed to foster positive debate, such as:
        i. I noticed that …
        ii.   I like the word …
        iii.   I wonder about …
        iv.   What if we combined/substituted/added …
    c. Teams of five to six may be able to reach consensus during this discussion. For larger teams, break into groups of three to four and ask each group to craft a new draft statement, based on the discussion. Often, these are close enough in wording for the group to come to overall agreement after a quick discussion.
2. Teams submit their vision statements to school leadership. The leadership team uses the same process to draft an overall vision statement for the school, first discussing the values and concerns reflected in the team statements. Then each member drafts a statement individually. The group follows the above discussion protocol to come to consensus on wording.
3. The leadership team may decide to hold one more professional learning community meeting, asking for suggestions for any wording adjustments. This allows each person to have input on wording that will make the statement motivational for him or her.

BUILD TRUST

A second cause of many professional learning community false starts is assuming that current relationships are healthy and have the level of trust needed for teachers to share what is and isn't working in their classroom. Hargreaves (2002) found that the emotion teachers most often associate with their coworkers is betrayal — a difficult place from which to share classroom practices. Further, bringing teachers together often unearths issues kept at bay when they worked in isolation.

Many shared leadership teams are aware of relationship difficulties among staff members. Because of the crucial role of trust, leaders should consider investing the small amount of time needed to use a secure, web-based survey such as www.surveymonkey.com to ask teachers for feedback on statements such as:

*   I'm comfortable having other teachers observe my classroom.
*   If I share lesson plans or samples of student work, I trust that my colleagues will provide helpful, nonjudgmental feedback.
*   Existing conflicts among staff may interfere with professional learning community work.
*   Some teachers on our team hold more power than others (Kise & Russell, 2010, p. 87).

If deep issues exist, leaders should consider launching professional learning communities with the help of an outside consultant versed in conflict resolution. More often than not, conflicts and issues of trust arise from misunderstandings of how colleagues learn and communicate. Time invested in clearing up these misunderstandings speeds rather than delays creating effective professional learning community teams.

Here are three activities leaders can use to build trust even as educators begin to collaborate.

Key article discussion. The leader chooses an article related to the overall professional learning community vision. To keep conversation respectful and focused on the text, introduce an effective discussion protocol. One that works well — and that teachers can use with students — is a protocol called Save the Last Word for Me. (Find this protocol along with others for discussing texts in the March 2012 issue of *The Leading Teacher,* available at www.learningforward.org/news/teacher.)

Using "outside" work. The leader gathers samples of student work, lesson plans, assessments, or rubrics created by teachers at other schools — or work that the leader creates — for teams' first experiences with collaborative conversations. Critiquing outside work instead of each other's practices often prompts sharing honest opinions.

Video observations. Use team time to watch a video clip of a teacher. The leader sets a clear focus for discussing the film clip, such as, "What moves does this teacher make and why?" "What evidence is there of students being asked to justify answers?" "How does this teacher encourage student-to-student interaction?" The leader's goal is to demonstrate how such a focus keeps observations informative rather than critical, as well as how much one can learn from observing another teacher.

TEACH COLLABORATION

Few people are born with the skills needed to listen, weigh different opinions, look for agreement, and work for the common good. Hargreaves (2007), Hord (2004), and Grossman,

WHAT ARE OUR NEEDS FOR COLLABORATION?

Directions: Groups generally include people with different informational and processing needs.

Note: These ideas are loosely based on the framework provided by personality type, popularized through the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

🟨	USING ONE COLOR of a highlighter pen, mark items on this chart that you might keep in mind to improve your own collaboration skills.
🟦	IN ANOTHER COLOR, highlight items that the team might consider as you set norms together to improve team communication and efficiency.

Some people like to talk things out. Others would rather think things through. Which of these suggestions might make you or your group more productive?

- Set agendas and distribute written materials or data to be discussed before meetings so that everyone can be prepared to talk.

- After discussing ideas, have team members do a two-minute quick write about their conclusions or "aha" moments, then share.

- Have someone record large group notes — flip charts, whiteboards, Smart Boards — so that everyone can more easily track conversations.

- Use a five-second rule. Wait five seconds after posing a question or making a statement before someone responds, allowing all a chance to form thoughts.

To ensure that your team pays attention to important details and proven methodologies while also seeking to innovate and imagine new ideas, consider these suggestions.

- Ask, "Are there options we haven't considered?" Use analogies to prompt new ideas.

- Seek ideas that have immediate classroom applications, tying changes to current or past practices.

- Tie suggested practices to theories and trends in education — the big picture.

- Think long term (the 24-month goal) while also seeking useful, measurable results (the one-month goal).

To ensure that decisions include logical, objective criteria and more subjective criteria such as individual needs or student voices, consider these suggestions.

- Assume that suggestions and ideas will be debated. Don't take it personally.

- Look for and acknowledge points of agreement as well as flaws.

- Practice stepping into others' shoes to understand their viewpoints, including the views of students, administrators, and other teachers.

- Include stories of student success or failure, as well as objective data, when making instructional decisions.

To balance the need for working efficiently within tight time frames with staying flexible to consider emerging information, consider these suggestions.

- Set meeting agendas that allow flexibility for extended conversations.

- Schedule time to revisit goals. Are they the right ones? Do they need to change?

- Allow flexibility in how members will carry out group decisions.

- Plan backward from group deadlines to ensure that each person knows when to start.

Wineburg, & Woolworth (2001) found that teachers struggle to collaborate deeply to improve teaching practices. The following activities help lay the groundwork.

Listen to how each person describes worthwhile meetings. The chart on p. 41 provides a useful tool for building understanding and setting norms before communication problems arise. Team members use one color to highlight items they want to keep in mind to improve their own collaboration skills. In another color, they highlight items they think might suggest key group norms. The group then discusses the suggestions and comes to agreement. This helps teams go beyond generic norms such as, "We will start on time," to ones that match their particular group's dynamics.

> How will leaders know if it's working? Professional learning community members will view their time together as key to improving student success.

Focus tasks. Many key professional learning community activities, such as examining student work, can be focused to demonstrate the value of collaboration. For example, I often have teachers begin with a sample set of student work from a common math assessment, asking them to use a rubric to rate student ability to explain their reasoning. Participants quickly realize that by avoiding other topics such as task design, accuracy, or appropriateness, they quickly gain new insights into how to assess student reasoning.

Vision, trust, and collaboration skills are essential if professional learning communities are to go the distance, yet leaders can start collaborative work while laying this equally essential foundation. How will leaders know if it's working? Professional learning community members will view their time together as key to improving student success, which is, after all, the true goal of a professional learning community.

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Where principals dare to dream

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example, about budgets and personnel issues — but also, more importantly, to "check in on their dreams" — to keep alive a vision of teaching, learning, and leadership that transcends the daily routine of a principal's work. So the Critical Friends Group continues to meet and learn together about leading. In fall 2012, we will begin year eight.

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