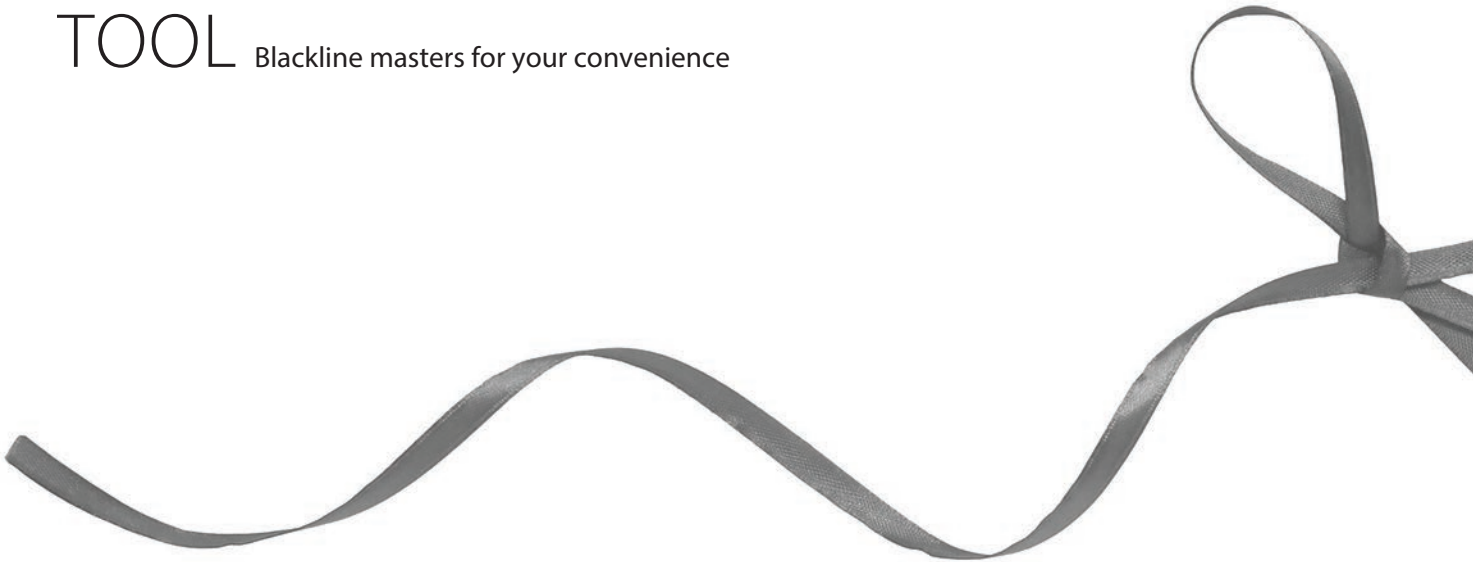


TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Becoming a Learning Team: A Guide to a Teacher-Led Cycle of Continuous Improvement
by Stephanie Hirsh and Tracy Crow

The learning team cycle as described in *Becoming a Learning Team* by Stephanie Hirsh and Tracy Crow was created to support teams of teachers working on particular lessons and instructional challenges within classrooms. Even as the day-to-day work of classroom teaching continues, educators are also responsible for addressing improvement goals at the school and system levels. What do educators need to do to ensure that professional learning and support is coherent across grade levels, subject areas, school buildings, and school systems?

WHAT IS COHERENCE?

In a coherent system, all initiatives that make a direct impact on teachers are aligned and reinforce one another's effectiveness; from the teachers' perspectives, coherent initiatives are neither redundant nor contradictory. At the same time, to be coherent, all professional learning aligns with teacher, school, and system priorities. Such priorities are expressed in either the systemwide vision for teaching and learning or an instructional framework for a school, or preferably, both. When teachers work in a coherent system, they know their priorities and they know why those are priorities. Coherence ensures that teachers don't spend their time with professional learning that makes them wonder, "What does this have to do with me?" or "How is this going to help me work better with my students?" Coherence makes it possible for a teacher to connect new professional learning with other learning he or she experiences, as well as to align it with the highest priorities of a team, school, and system.

Coherence puts all educators on the same systemwide map, so to speak. Every teacher, every principal, knows where he or she is headed, who will travel with them, and who is driving the bus. They see options for getting where they are headed and they have the knowledge and skills to pick the most effective route. In outlining the importance of coherence, the Outcomes standard of Learning Forward's (2011) Standards for Professional Learning states:

> **Outcomes:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards. (p. 48)

The Outcomes standard encompasses three interrelated elements that professional learning must address to increase likelihood that it is linked

to educator and student learning: meet performance standards, address learning outcomes, and build coherence. Of the last element, the standard further explains:

> Coherence requires that professional learning builds on what educators have already learned; focuses on learning outcomes and pedagogy aligned with national or local curriculum and assessments for educator and student learning; aligns with educator performance standards; and supports educators in developing sustained, ongoing professional communication with other educators who are engaged in similar changes in their practice. Any single professional learning activity is more likely to be effective in improving educator performance and student learning if it builds on earlier professional learning and is followed up with later, more advanced work to become a part of a coherent set of opportunities for ongoing professional learning. Coherence also ensures that professional learning is a part of a seamless process that begins in the preparation program and continues throughout an educator's career and aligns tightly with the expectations for effectiveness defined in performance standards and student learning outcomes. (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 50)

While the Outcomes standard emphasizes coherence of learning for any given educator, other standards also stress the importance of alignment among learners and across grade levels, departments, and buildings. In the Learning Communities standard, for example, alignment is a central element:

> Professional learning that occurs within learning communities provides an ongoing system of support for continuous improvement and implementation of school and systemwide initiatives. To avoid fragmentation among learning communities and to strengthen their contribution to school and system goals, public officials and school system leaders create policies that establish formal accountability for results along with the support needed to achieve results. To be effective, these policies and supports align with an explicit vision and goals for successful learning communities. Learning communities align their goals with those of the school and school system, engage in continuous professional learning, and hold all members collectively accountable for results. (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 26)

ABOUT THE BOOK

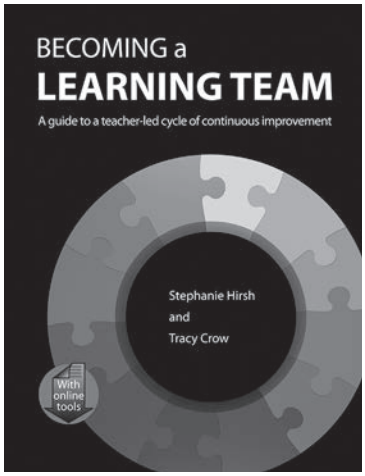
Becoming a Learning Team offers teachers step-by-step guidance in using collaborative learning time to solve specific student learning challenges.

Teacher teams can use the tools and strategies to:

- Understand the value and importance of collaborative learning to improve teaching and learning;
- Launch a learning team cycle with five key stages;
- Implement each of the five stages with specific strategies and supporting protocols;
- Adapt the cycle to fit specific school and district calendars and initiatives; and
- Engage external support in sustaining learning teams.

This book builds on the ideas explored in companion publications *Becoming a Learning System* and *Becoming a Learning School*. Each chapter includes additional tools and vignettes of actual school-based learning teams to help teachers facilitate or lead learning team cycles as part of their daily routines.

Order today at
http://store.learningforward.org
Price: $45.00
Member Price: $36.00



DEFINING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO COHERENCE

Purpose	To build understanding of what systemwide coherence looks like and educators' roles in contributing to coherence.	
Recommended time	70 minutes	
Materials	A TALE OF TWO TEAMS, pp. 61-62 TABLE, p. 66	
Process	1. Share the reading A TALE OF 2 TEAMS as well as the following table and list of responsibilities of those in various roles. Ask individuals to read the short piece, and to highlight or underline the actions educators are taking that contribute to the outcomes teams experience in each of the two examples.	10 minutes
	2. Discuss the reading as a group. Volunteer instances of how particular educator actions contribute tyo coherence or a lack of coherence in these examples.	20 minutes
	3. Turn to the table of roles and responsibilities. Considering the local context, individually fill in the table with how your system or school operates now.	15 minutes
	4. Using the list of suggested actions for those in various roles, consider what actions or shifts in responsibilities might help to build coherence to fill in the next two columns of the table. Do this either as a group or in pairs. Include actions that aren't on the list of suggestions as they occur to the group.	25 minutes

A TALE OF 2 TEAMS

Without coherence, the impact of specific instances of team-based learning will be limited, no matter how successful they are on their own.

Meaningful and effective learning at one level must connect with meaningful and effective learning at another level. For example, let's say a team of three language arts teachers has set a team goal tied to improving students' vocabulary use, given the needs they identified through data analysis. After discussion and study, these teachers chose to learn about and implement a particular instructional strategy in several upcoming lessons. As they read through subsequent samples of student work, they found that their approach had been successful, and they talked about how to use their learning to go further during their next unit.

A team of teachers in any setting could experience such success through their collaborative learning. They identified an adult learning need connected to a student learning need, they found a way to address it that involved building their own capacity, and they saw an impact on student learning. Why does it matter if the system in which those teachers worked was a coherent system?

WELL, LET'S LOOK AT THAT TEAM IN A SYSTEM THAT LACKS COHERENCE

The three teachers identify a legitimate student learning need based on data. Because the district they work in doesn't have a common vision or share a deep understanding across all educators about what students need to know and be able to do, the need they identify isn't tied directly to particular instructional priorities. While the learning they do has value for them as individuals and a team, these educators only have so many hours in a day. When their other learning or perceived priorities don't line up with what they do as a team, they may lose the opportunity to focus on what they chose as a key priority. They may be spending time in districtwide learning that doesn't have anything to do with the challenge they face each day, and that takes up both time and energy. They may choose a next focus as a team and continue to experience success. However, if their school or system leaders don't value or recognize the advancements they are making with their students, they will lose motivation to continue, and they may also lose the structures that give them time to collaborate.

The leaders in that system won't necessarily be at fault; they may also be working hard on particular priorities and challenges. Their intention is to support the educators in their system with the best ways they know how. They see opportunities to try a range of initiatives or approaches that show promise for helping both students and teachers. With every new initiative they place into educators' days, they muddy teachers' understanding about what they are supposed to do and why they are doing it.

Since every educator in this system isn't headed in the same direction and speaking the same language, they end up working at cross purposes — all with great intentions and passionate energy. The harder they work, the more frustrated they get. And their students are equally lost, though some will certainly be experiencing excellent teaching and others will not.

Continued on p. 62

A TALE OF 2 TEAMS, *Continued from p. 61*

NOW, LET'S LOOK AT THAT SAME TEAM IN A COHERENT SYSTEM

When the team of three teachers identify its highest learning need, they look at data. As they do that, they know what the system's most pressing instructional needs are, and how those needs connect to a common vision for teaching and learning overall. That understanding drives how they identify their needs and their student needs.

Because all of the learning that this team experiences is connected to a shared vision and set of priorities, those educators see common threads that tie their learning hours together. All of the different learning events advance their knowledge, even though some of those hours are spent in a schoolwide study group, some are spent in team learning time, and others are spent online in a course that fills a knowledge-and-skills gap. Being able to connect their myriad learning opportunities means they go deeper with their learning.

The school and system leaders who support this team acknowledge the success it found with students because the entire system is working toward the same big goals. The team has opportunities to share its learning and success with other educators, and that expertise moves to other rooms and buildings. Meanwhile, other teams are having similar experiences, and they share their successes, and challenges as well. The knowledge and skills in the system multiply and build on one another.

When it is time for these three language arts teachers to identify their next learning goal, they know, as do their colleagues, how they've advanced along the continuum toward their vision. They set their goal based on where they're headed, and they know they will have the support to get there.

KEY ACTIONS

TEACHERS

Key actions to build and maintain coherence include:

- Communicating within and across teams about highest priority learning needs for both students and adults.
- Sharing individual learning needs with team members to make connections to team learning needs.
- Identifying what learning options would most contribute to critical professional learning needs.
- Explicitly connecting prior learning with future and current learning.
- Communicating team learning challenges and successes across the school and district.
- Advocating with school and district leaders for opportunities to connect with other educators who share similar challenges.
- Speaking out when there is lack of coherence.
- Protecting practices that align the learning team to those that most align with the individual, school, and system priorities.
- Avoiding bringing to the team tempting initiatives that have little or nothing to do with the purpose of the learning team.

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES AND DEPARTMENT HEADS

Key actions to build coherence include:

- Advocating for teacher voice in school and district vision-building efforts.
- Supporting school and team conversations about the common vision to create shared understanding and common language around teaching and learning.
- Helping individual educators see and create connections among all of their professional learning and among their learning and that of their students.
- Creating or facilitating opportunities for teams to share their professional learning challenges and successes across the school and district.
- Identifying expertise within one team that would help another learning team.
- Communicating teacher and team learning needs to school and district leaders and advocating for greater coherence across schools and departments.
- Building skills among members of the learning team to be able to assess, choose, and sustain practices that are most closely aligned with individual, school, and system priorities.
- Helping members of the learning team to assess and determine whether tempting initiatives are relevant or have little or nothing to do with the purpose of the learning team.

PRINCIPALS

Key actions to build coherence include:

- Contributing to a districtwide common vision with the participation of a school leadership team that includes teachers.
- Facilitating school and team conversations about the common vision to create shared understanding and common language around teaching and learning.

Continued on p. 64

KEY ACTIONS, *Continued from p. 63*

- Advocating for professional learning that prepares all educators to meet the needs outlined in the common vision.
- Creating opportunities for teams to share their professional learning challenges and successes across the school and district.
- Holding professional learning accountable to the shared understanding of what high-quality learning entails.
- Using the district's educator evaluation system as an opportunity to connect individual, school, and district learning needs and prioritize meaningful learning.
- Engaging in professional learning that strengthens knowledge and skills in creating coherent learning for every learner in the building.
- Providing members of learning teams opportunities to apply their knowledge of coherent learning to assess, choose, and sustain practices that are most closely aligned with individual, school, and system priorities.
- Refraining from introducing yet another initiative if it has little or nothing to do with the purpose of the learning team.
- Giving the learning team the decision rights to assess and decline an opportunity to pursue a tempting initiative, if they decide it has little or nothing to do with the purpose of the learning team.

CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS

Key actions to build coherence include:

- Establishing, in concert with educators from every level and building in the district, a districtwide common vision and instructional frameworks that outline the vision for teaching and learning in the system.
- Facilitating ongoing discussions about what the common vision means, where the district's students are in relation to the performance standards, and what steps will be taken to close learning gaps for students and adults.
- Providing a wide range of learning opportunities, resources, and support aligned to the common vision.
- Holding professional learning accountable to the shared understanding of what high-quality learning entails.
- Communicating clearly with all stakeholders about how all initiatives within the system connect to a common vision for learning.
- Eliminating silos among all departments and buildings in a system to increase communication, coherence, and shared understanding.
- Creating opportunities for teams to share their professional learning challenges and successes across the district.
- Using the district's educator evaluation system as an opportunity to connect individual, school, and district learning needs and prioritize meaningful learning.
- Engaging in professional learning that strengthens knowledge and skills in creating coherent learning for every learner in the district.
- Establishing and promoting a process for introducing new initiatives and discontinuing or scaling up existing ones.
- Clarifying and supporting the notions that school-based learning teams possess the autonomy, accountability, responsibility, and right to choose, refine, and fulfill the student and educator learning goals that they believe are most closely aligned with individual, school, and system priorities.

ROLE	HOW DO CURRENT RESPONSIBILITIES HELP CREATE COHERENCE?	WHAT ACTIONS OR SHIFTS MIGHT IMPROVE COHERENCE?	WHAT SPECIFIC OUTCOMES WOULD BE THE RESULT OF SUCH SHIFTS?
Teacher			
Instructional coach			
Department head			
School leader or principal			
Central office leader			