THE FINAL 2%

WHAT IT TAKES TO CREATE PROFOUND CHANGE IN LEADERS

BY DENNIS SPARKS

My work in the field of staff development for the past 25 years has revealed to me deep feelings of discontent among countless teachers, administrators, and policymakers regarding the quality of professional learning in schools. Many educational leaders from the schoolhouse to the statehouse are frustrated with the glacially slow pace of change in this critically important area.

The positive side of such frustration, though, is the energy it generates for deep and significant change in professional learning in schools and a recognition at all levels that if we continue to do what we have always done, we will get what we have always gotten. Leaders are challenging entrenched thinking about staff development practices that for far too long have ill-served teachers and their students.

High-quality professional learning is essential if school reform efforts are to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Successful professional learning communities clearly demonstrate what is possible when teachers learn and collaborate within their schools as part of their daily work. Well-implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers.

David Perkins (2004) lists four "knowledge arts" that he would like schools to cultivate in students that are in tune with the goals of professional learning communities: creating knowledge, communicating knowledge, organizing knowledge, and acting on knowledge. Professional learning communities extend the "knowledge arts" to teachers: Teachers create knowledge about teaching and learning, communicate it to one another, organize it within themselves and for others to make it more meaningful and accessible, and act on that knowledge for the purpose of improving student learning.

LEADERS MATTER

Leaders matter in the creation and long-term maintenance of professional learning communities. The quality of teaching, learning, and relationships in professional

learning communities depends on the quality of leadership provided by principals and teachers. Leaders matter because they have the authority to shape conversations — what is talked about and how it is talked about — through "Teachable Points of View" and "Interactive Teaching" that lead to essential professional learning.

Leaders shape conversations by persistently offering their values, intentions, and beliefs to others and by expressing themselves in clear declarative sentences. Leaders also matter because they, along with others, shape a school or school system's structure and culture in ways that promote learning, collaboration, and environments in which all members of the community feel cared for and respected.

Profound change in schools, I believe, begins with profound change in leaders that radiates out to others and into the system. Structural change is almost always required, but it is not sufficient. New positions can be created, job descriptions rewritten, and teaching schedules modified — to name just a few structural changes — without deeply affecting teachers' understanding of what they teach, the ways in which they teach it, or their relationships with one another and with their students.

Profound change in leaders results from and is revealed through deeper understanding of complex issues related to professional learning communities, beliefs that are aligned with quality teaching and high levels of learning for all students, and "next action thinking" that moves learning into action and sustains the momentum of change over time. As a result of their professional learning, leaders alter what they think, say, and do in ways that are observable to others. Put another way, profound professional learning produces teachers and administrators who say what they have not said, believe what they have not believed, understand what they have not understood, and

Reprinted from *JSD*, Spring 2005, Vol. 26, No. 2. Dennis Sparks is emeritus executive director of NSDC (now Learning Forward). Issue theme: Leadership at the school level.

AN EXAMPLE OF A 'TEACHABLE POINT OF VIEW'

Here's an example of a "teachable point of view" I might use at staff meetings if I were a principal.

Over time, a principal might create additional TPOVs for each of the **boldface** words or phrases. The TPOVs would be of different lengths and levels of complexity depending on the purpose (to inform the school community, to engage teachers in dialogue on important issues, etc.) and audience (teachers, parents, or students). They might be spoken or distributed in written form through newsletters, websites or other means of communication. With experience, leaders would create more nuanced and complex TPOVs reflecting a variety of subjects.

"I believe the quality of our teaching is the most important thing in determining the quality of learning students experience in this school. I believe that the quality of relationships that we as adults have with one another has a profound effect on the quality of relationships students experience here, both with us and with other students. I want every student to experience **quality teaching** in every classroom and be surrounded and supported by **quality relationships** with adults and peers.

"It may be helpful for me to be more specific about some of my beliefs related to teaching and learning. I believe that **beginning teachers benefit from the practical, day-to-day support of other teachers.** I believe that the most **powerful forms of professional learning** occur as part of what teachers do every day rather than separate from it. The daily tasks of teaching — planning lessons, figuring out how to reach and teach hard-to-teach kids, and communicating with parents, to name a few — are sources of vital teamwork and continuous learning for teachers.

"I believe these things in part because of the professional literature we have been studying together over the past year. I also hold these beliefs because as a beginning teacher I had the good fortune to work at a high school in which I was assigned to two teaching teams that met several times a week. We planned our lessons together and watched one another teach. We gave each other feedback, although it was rudimentary. In addition, a mentor guided me during my first year in the classroom.

"While I am grateful for those experiences, in retrospect I know that they could have been even more powerful. My teaching colleagues and I did not have a very **extensive intellectual framework or vocabulary to talk about our teaching** so we did not always know how to describe what we were doing and how to improve it. We did not know about rubrics and missed the insights they would have provided regarding the quality of student work and the guidance they would have offered us and our students. We did not have any **sources of data** or **other evidence of student learning** beyond scores on teacher-made tests and student papers. My mentor, while well-intentioned, was not clear about his responsibilities, and because he had not been trained for this role, I floundered more than was necessary.

"We are on the right track. We already use several types of data to determine our school and team goals and to measure progress. We have formed ourselves into teams, have developed rubrics that we use with our students, and apply research on effective teaching in various subject areas to help us talk to one another about good teaching. To inform our planning, we've been reading about mentoring, lesson study, and using **protocols** to inform our discussions of student work.

"I am confident we can use all these tools and others to find even better ways to serve our students and one another."

— Dennis Sparks

do what they have not done. Without change in those vital areas, I believe that very little of substance will change in ways that improve teaching and student learning.

Leaders can alter what they think, say, and do to address what I believe are the most fundamental barriers to professional learning communities so that what I have termed the final 2% of professional learning occurs. The primary means for leaders' ongoing learning is their development of "Teachable Points of View" and their engagement of members of the school community in dialogue regarding their views.

THE "FINAL 2%"

Of all the things said and done at the national, state, and local level to improve the quality of professional learning and collaboration in schools, only a handful directly affect what teachers learn and how well they work together. Imagine a set of events and activities along a continuum that leads to high-quality professional learning that improves teaching and increases student achievement. On the left side of the continuum are federal, state, and district policies and regulations that are intended to affect professional development. In the middle of the

continuum are structural changes and planning decisions regarding school improvement goals, strategies, and evaluation processes. All of these activities — state and federal legislation, board and administrative policies, structural changes, the reallocation of resources, and district and school improvement planning, to name a few — are merely preludes to the activities that actually produce the professional learning (knowledge, skills, beliefs), collaborative relationships, and improved practice that are their intended goal. Expressed another way, while schools may declare themselves professional learning communities, alter their schedules to enable teams of teachers to meet on a regular basis, and allocate resources to teacher leadership positions such as mentors or academic coaches, these activities are insufficient unless the final 2% of activities are carefully considered and well-executed on a day-to-day basis.

The final 2% is that cluster of experiences that literally change the brains of teachers and administrators. Educators have these experiences that literally change the brains of teachers and administrators. Educators have these experiences when they read, write, observe, use various thinking strategies, listen, speak, and practice new behaviors in ways that deepen understanding, affect beliefs, produce new habits of mind and behavior, and are combined in ways that alter practice. Such professional learning produces complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers and leaders and continuously enhances their professional judgment.

The professional learning activities themselves that comprise the final 2% can take many forms, some familiar and others less familiar to most teachers. The more familiar forms are designed a lot like a classroom — someone (a teacher, administrator, professor, or consultant) teaches teachers in a group setting. Optimally, this design uses methods that align with the school or school system's sense of good teaching.

For instance, Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam (2004) offer their view of effective teaching by describing generic teaching strategies that if consistently applied "would raise a school in the lower quartile of the national performance tables to well above average" (p. 11). They mention procedures such as allowing students a longer wait time to move student responses from brief, factual answers to extended statements and to engage more students in discussions; providing students with comments on written and oral responses rather than through numerical scores or letter grades; and using peer- and self-assessment to promote deeper learning. Teachers who learned about these research findings, the authors report, "built up a repertoire of generic skills. They planned their questions, allowed appropriate wait time, and gave feedback that was designed to cause thinking. They ensured that students were given enough time during lessons to evaluate their own work and that of others" (p. 16).

Drawing on the perspectives offered by other types of research, Jacqueline Grennon Brooks (2004) cites cognitive science and neuropsychological brain studies as a source of guidance on deepening student understanding and increasing motivation. She recommends practices such as seeking and valuing student points of view, one-minute writing exercises for students to increase their conceptual understanding, and problem-based learning and visual mapping approaches to provide pictorial representations of ideas, objects, and/or events.

It simply makes sense that teachers who learn through approaches such as those recommended by Black and his colleagues and by Brooks are more likely to understand and apply what they have learned. Of particular interest is Black and his colleagues' conclusion that it is essential if these strategies are to be implemented in classrooms that leaders find time for groups of teachers to meet on a regular basis for study and discussion and for those groups to report on their progress at faculty meetings.

The less familiar final 2% of professional learning activities are especially well-suited to the purposes and structures of professional learning communities. *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (Easton, 2004) describes a number of such methods: action research, designing and evaluating student assessments, case discussions, classroom walk-throughs, Critical Friends Groups, curriculum design, data analysis, lesson study, journal writing, mentoring, peer coaching, portfolios, shadowing students, tuning protocols, and study groups, to name a few. "This type of staff development is powerful because it arises from and returns to the world of teaching and learning," Easton writes. "It begins with what will really help young people learn, engages those involved in helping them learn, and has an effect on the classrooms (and schools, districts, even states) where those students and their teachers learn" (p. 2).

The final 2% also includes the culture-shaping activities that affect what teachers discuss, the manner in which it is discussed, the openness with which group members offer and absorb various perspectives, and the energy generated by connections to a worthy purpose and to respected colleagues (Sparks, 2005). These activities address the interpersonal challenges of leadership, the unpredictable and emotion-laden experiences that have a significant effect on human performance and relationships.

FUNDAMENTAL BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

When educators discuss barriers to professional community in schools, they almost always mention lack of money and time, recalcitrant teachers or teacher unions, and principals and district administrators who lack desire or skill in leading such efforts. While most schools would benefit from additional resources, particularly those

schools serving high concentrations of low-income and minority students, few schools effectively use the professional learning resources currently available to them. For example, faculty, department, and grade-level meetings are seldom used to promote learning and meaningful collaboration regarding teaching and learning. Staff development days often lack focus, substance, continuity across time, and extension into classroom practice in ways that significantly affect teaching. Given that perspective, I believe that the primary barriers to professional learning communities are a lack of clarity regarding values, intentions, and beliefs; dependence on those outside of schools for solutions to problems; and a sense of resignation that robs educators of the energy that is essential to continuously improving teaching, learning, and relationships in schools.

The importance of clarity is based on the premises that we move toward what is clearest to us and that it is very difficult to create what we cannot describe in some detail. Fortunately, we have the ability to clarify our values, intentions, and beliefs through processes such as writing and discussion with others.

Dependence means that teachers and principals wait for others to direct their actions. It is a byproduct of school reform initiatives that the source of direction and knowledge resides outside of K-12 schools in the hands of policymakers, researchers, and consultants. Schools are more likely to thrive, I believe, when they function interdependently with district offices, universities, and other educational entities. Schools can benefit from knowledge and perspectives derived from the outside, but for many schools the balance between internal and external sources of knowledge and action has become so skewed that those in schools no longer see themselves as initiators of action or inventors of solutions to problems.

Resignation is an intellectual and emotional state in which educators believe that their individual and collective actions cannot improve teaching and learning, particularly given the large and serious problems that affect the lives of far too many students and their families. A profound consequence of this belief is that teachers and administrators act as if they have a very small, or perhaps even nonexistent, circle of influence related to student learning.

Here's an example from my recent experience: A teacher friend described an "inservice" in which an elementary school faculty watched videotapes about professional learning communities. My friend commented that the person speaking in the video, who happened to be Rick DuFour, said that there are obstacles to the development of professional learning communities and that she wished he had said what they were. I responded that I believed that the faculty of her school could do a pretty good job in an hour or two of identifying the barriers that stood in their way and that their list would be at least as helpful as any that DuFour might have provided.

She doubted that was true, and our conversation eventually turned to other things.

The good news is that each of us as leaders can do something about those problems, starting with ourselves. We extend our influence on teaching, learning, and relationships within schools when we are clear about our values, intentions, and assumptions. We also extend our influence when we act in ways that are consistent with the belief that we already possess the ability and authority to improve teaching, learning, and relationships.

A "TEACHABLE POINT OF VIEW"

At their essence, successful professional learning communities are places in which everyone is both a teacher and a student. Continuous improvement in teaching, student achievement, and the quality of relationships among all members of the community is based on a continuous cycle of teaching and learning and an openness by everyone in the community to learn from everyone else in the community no matter what their title or status.

In *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win,* Noel Tichy (2002) describes the leader's role in such organizations: "[T]eaching is the most means through which a leader can lead" (p. 57). He adds: "Everyone in the organization is expected to be constantly in a teaching and learning mode. …[T]rue learning takes place only when the leader/teacher invests the time and emotional energy to engage those around him or her in a dialogue that produces mutual understanding" (p. 58). The starting point, Tichy says, is when "a leader commits to teaching, creates the conditions for being taught him or herself, and helps the students have the self-confidence to engage and teach as well" (p. 21).

This teaching and learning is enacted, Tichy says, through Virtuous Teaching Cycles in which learning flows in various directions throughout the organization. Leaders' Teachable Points of View (TPOVs) provide the content, and interactive teaching offers the means for learning. "In a Virtuous Teaching Cycle," Tichy writes, "each act or event of teaching improves the knowledge and abilities of both the students and the teachers and spurs them both to go on and to share what they have learned with others. It creates a cascade of teaching and learning" (pp. 52-53).

A TPOV, Tichy writes, is "a cohesive set of ideas and concepts that a person is able to articulate clearly to others" (p. 74). A TPOV reveals clarity of thought regarding ideas and values and is a tool for communicating them to others, he says. Tichy believes it is critical that leaders have TPOVs about an "urgent need that is clear and palpable to everyone in the organization" (p. 85), "a mission that is inspiring and clearly worth achieving" (p. 86), "goals that

stretch people's abilities' (p. 86), and "a spirit of teamwork" (p. 88). He also recommends that leaders develop TPOVs for the central ideas that will move the organization toward its goals, on the values that express the type of behavior desired by the organization, on the ways to generate positive emotional energy within the organization, and on the "edge" (the thought processes that inform tough yes-or-no decisions).

CREATING TEACHABLE POINTS OF VIEW

Earlier I asserted that significant change in organizations begins with significant change in what leaders think, say, and do. I also claimed that as this change radiates out to others, it can have a profound effect on the quality of professional learning within a school and ultimately on the school's culture and structures. These changes, I believe, have their origins in clarity regarding ideas, values, intentions, assumptions, requests, and next actions. That clarity is best expressed in simple, declarative sentences. In my experience, it is very difficult to accomplish things we cannot describe. Teachable Points of View of various lengths and levels of complexity prepared in different language and forms for different audiences and timeframes provide an ideal means for achieving such clarity.

"The very act of creating a Teachable Point of View makes people better leaders," Tichy argues. "[L]eaders come to understand their underlying assumptions about themselves, their organization, and business in general. When implicit knowledge becomes explicit, it can then be questioned, refined, and honed, which benefits both the leaders and the organizations" (p. 97).

Creating a TPOV is an unfamiliar and challenging task for many leaders, Tichy recognizes. "It requires first doing the intellectual work of figuring out what our point of view is, and then the creative work of putting it into a form that makes it accessible and interesting to others," he writes (p. 100).

The importance of clarity is based on the premise that we move toward what is clearest to us.

Creating a TPOV is hard work, Tichy acknowledges. "It requires a total commitment of head, heart, and guts. The head part is the intellectual work of taking decades of implicit internal knowledge and making it explicit. It means framing the various ideas and beliefs that underlie your actions, and then tying them together into a cohesive whole" (p. 101).

Tichy strongly recommends writing as a means of developing a TPOV. In addition, he recommends reflecting, getting feedback from others, and revising: "The process of articulating one's Teachable Point of View is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing, iterative, and interactive process" (p. 103).

A starting place in creating TPOVs is for leaders to write a few hundred words on one of the topics of importance within professional learning communities. For instance, leaders might create TPOVs related to professional learning and collaboration in their schools, instructional leadership, quality teaching, the attributes of the relationships desired in the school among teachers and between teachers and students, and various means of assessing student progress in addition to standardized tests.

Or leaders might take Dennis Littky's advice, offered in *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone's Business* (2004): "[S]tart right now by creating your own vision of how your school might become a great school. Start this as an internal dialogue, use the margins of this book or a journal to sketch out your first ideas, and then get together with people around you and begin to build a collective vision. Imagine what your school would look like if the changes you imagine began to take hold. Live off that beauty and let it push you on" (p. 195).

I encourage leaders to develop TPOVs on important subjects that vary in length from five-minute vision speeches to daylong interactive teaching events to brief presentations for faculty meetings, parent get-togethers, and other venues that promote the type of learning processes proposed below. Leaders also can gather a school's leadership team and create common TPOVs around central ideas and values.

USING STORIES AND DIALOGUE TO CONVEY TEACHABLE POINTS OF VIEW

Leaders communicate their TPOVs through what Tichy calls interactive teaching. Leaders who engage in interactive teaching operate from the mindset that they have something to learn from their students as well as something to teach them and that to relate to them in that spirit is more effective than telling or selling.

Stories provide a powerful means by which TPOVs can be explained, illustrated, and understood in human terms. Stories provide listeners with a plot line and a cast of characters. Tichy recommends weaving TPOVs into stories "that people can understand, relate to and remember. It is not enough to have slogans and mission/values statements. People don't sign up for that. People follow leaders who can make them part of something exciting" (p. 121). Tichy describes three types of stories:

- Who am I? (explains the real-life experiences that have shaped the leader and his or her TPOVs);
- Who are we? (describes the common experiences and beliefs of those in the organization); and
- Where are we going? (describes what the organization is aiming to do and how it is going to do it).

Dialogue is another effective means for creating Virtuous Teaching Cycles. Dialogue is distinct from discussion,

debate, and argument.

Advocacy for a point of view is not part of dialogue, nor does it attempt to convince others that they are wrong. While these methods sometimes have their place, they often pro- duce defensiveness, which is a barrier to the deep understanding and transformational learning that often accompany dialogue. The assumptions leaders hold as unquestionable "truths" often represent some of the most fruitful areas for dialogue because alterations in these assumptions can produce profound changes in behavior and relationships. When leaders listen with their full attention and truly honor a speaker's views and experience, relationships are deepened and individuals profoundly changed.

"Dialogue ... imposes a rigorous discipline on the participants," Daniel Yankelovich writes in *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Into Cooperation* (1999). "[W]hen dialogue is done skillfully, the results can be extraordinary: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened" (p. 16). The discipline that Yankelovich recommends includes equality among participants, an absence of coercive influences, listening with empathy, and bringing assumptions into the open while suspending judgment.

In *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation,* Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard (1998) list several qualities of genuine dialogue: suspension of judgment, release of our need for a specific outcome, an inquiry into and examination of underlying assumptions, authenticity, a slower pace of interaction with silence between speakers, and listening deeply to self and others for collective meaning. To those ends, they suggest focusing on shared meaning and learning, listening without resistance, respecting differences, suspending role and status distinctions, sharing responsibility and leadership, and speaking to the group as a whole (one-on-one conversations in front of a group can lead to the disengagement of other group members).

Reprinted and adapted, with permission, from *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (Solution Tree, 2005).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus your professional learning on transforming what you think, say, and do. Translate learning into action. Use transformation in thought, word, and deed as the standard against which you assess the quality of your own learning and that of others in the school community.
- Begin to address lack of clarity, resignation, and dependency by developing Teachable Points of View that address some or all of the topics suggested here.
- Use various modes of "interactive teaching" — particularly dialogue — to activate and sustain learning throughout the organization. Engage others in dialogue regarding your TPOVs. Focus on assumptions, ideas, and values. Honor others' views and be open to having your views changed.
- Focus efforts on activities that represent the final 2% of professional learning — the part that literally changes human brains — and on collaboration to ensure that teaching, student learning, and relationships are significantly improved.

Skillful leadership on the part of principals and teachers is essential if professional learning communities are to fulfill their primary function of continuously improving the quality of teaching, learning, and relationships in schools. To that end, what leaders think, say, and do matters.

Skillful leaders address the barriers of resignation, dependence, and lack of clarity by clearly articulating their Teachable Points of View through stories and other means, engaging the school community in continuous dialogue regarding their views, and consistently asserting that the potential of students and staff alike can be more fully realized. There is no higher purpose for the exercise of leadership in schools.

REFERENCES

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2004). Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom. *Phi Delta Kappan, 86*(1), 9-21.

Brooks, J.G. (2004, September). To see beyond the lesson. *Educational Leadership, 62*(1), 8-12.

Easton, L.B. (Ed.). (2004). *Powerful designs for professional learning.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

Ellinor, L. & Gerard, G. (1998). *Dialogue: Rediscover the transforming power of conversation.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Littky, D., with Grabelle, S. (2004). *The big picture: Education is everyone's business.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Perkins, D. (2004, September). Knowledge alive. *Educational Leadership, 62*(1), 14-18.

Sparks, D. (2005). *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press/NSDC.

Tichy, N., with Cardwell, N. (2002). *The cycle of leadership: How great leaders teach their companies to win.* New York: HarperBusiness.

Yankelovich, D. (1999). *The magic of dialogue: Transforming conflict into cooperation.* New York: Simon & Shuster. ■