PLCs and Habits of Mind

The work of Art Costa and Bena Kallick (2000) proposed 16 habits of mind for effective thinking. In a recent article in Kappan, Elliott Seif joined with Costa and Kallik to identify seven of the habits as crucial to creating cultural norms that support continuous educator growth and development.

- Remaining open to continuous learning
- Thinking about thinking
- Figuring things out
- Communicating
- Creating, imagining, and innovating
- Taking responsible risks
- Persisting

As I reviewed the seven, I thought they provided a planning and assessment guide for effective PLCs.

Remaining open to continuous learning – I often use the phrase, “There is no mountaintop to teaching.” It’s a career

where one doesn't need to be concerned that master will precede retirement. Educator learning that generates student learning should be the center of PLC time. I differentiate PWCs (professional working communities) from PLCs (professional learning communities.) In PWCs teachers collaborate to get work done. They might design common assessments or map out schedules for rotating their time with learners or complete requests from administration. PWCs can be valuable for alignment and efficiency. PLCs study, learn, and explore to figure out what teachers can do to advance student success beyond current levels. They ask, "What do our students need us to learn?"

Thinking about thinking – Time and space for reflection tend to be short for teachers. PLCs should create that opportunity. Student work and assessments being reviewed and questioned by colleagues drive a deeper reflection than is likely to occur when teachers work in isolation. **The Power of Reflection for Educator Professional Development** identifies that reflection helps educators……

- Enhance Self-Awareness: Reflecting on teaching methods and student interactions helps educators better understand their strengths and weaknesses, leading to more effective strategies.
- Promote Continuous Learning: Regular reflection encourages educators to pursue ongoing professional development and stay informed about the latest teaching practices and educational technologies.
- Foster Student-Centered Learning: Reflection helps educators adapt their approaches to meet diverse student needs, ultimately improving engagement and achievement.

Figuring things out – Forming and testing hypothesizes helps PLCs explore multiple pathways to solutions for problems they have identified. PLC members should be sharing their observational findings and generalizing to form hypothesises.

“What do you think would happen if we.…?”

“What if we took a completely different approach?”

“How would things change if we ….?”

The elements of ambiguity, flexibility, and what-if thinking combine as PLCs form initial hunches, take action, observe the results, consider cause and effect, and modify or change the hypothesis.

Communicating – Working collaboratively requires developing effective communication skills. Zachary Herrmann describes the need to communicate when conflicts in thinking are present among a PLC team.

“For cooperative teams, conflict is likely to be seen as something to avoid, not something to welcome. In fact, some cooperative teams find ways to remove dissenting voices, because they can be perceived to be a problem for the team, rather than a resource. Efficient members of cooperative teams make concessions or attempt to reach quick compromises to resolve conflict and keep the work moving along. Collaborative teams, on the other hand, often actively lean in to differences and explore the complexity of the problem. While a collaborative approach may not help a team reach a “solution” more quickly, members don’t forfeit the opportunity to collectively deepen their understanding of the problem. As they express their hopes and concerns, the team can start to visualize a more complete picture of the opportunity or challenge, and that picture grows even more comprehensive as additional voices are brought to the table. When and if conflict arises, these differences in fact fuel the team’s collaborative efforts. Solving complex problems requires learning, and we stand to learn the most from those who are different than us.”

Creating, imagining, and innovating – Michael Hernandez shares how even PLCs that use tech to connect teachers globally can

support innovation.

“We all get stuck in a rut sometimes or just haven’t quite figured out how to get past pedagogical challenges. PLCs can provide fresh lesson ideas and give you strategies for implementing new curriculum. They can be that source of inspiration and lift you up when times are tough. A good PLC often provides that shift of perspective we need to see challenges in new ways and observe how fellow teachers have solved similar problems in other places. Good ideas can come from anywhere, and when we turn to people from different locations or school cultures, they can help us see new possibilities.”

Taking responsible risks – Trying new and different ways to do something, even if there is a chance for failure. Effective PLCs keep initial ideas on the table for brainstorming, combining ideas, and analyzing, eventually leading to an idea for experimentation. It’s critical that the understanding is that an idea needs enough merit to start, not a sense of guarantee that it will work. Tracking the progress of an implemented idea by teammates creates a safety link that a “wrong idea” will be discovered, modified, and learned from

before any negative impact would be catastrophic. I suggest that a good questions to ask before heading into an experiment can be*, " What's the worst thing that could happen?"*

Persisting – Persevering with a task until it's complete. Looking for a way to reach your goal when stuck and not giving up. Perseverance is contagious. The determination of one person can inspire and uplift others. By fostering a culture of perseverance, teams and communities can achieve collective goals. When a project faces setbacks, team members who persevere, support one another, and brainstorm creative solutions that can turn challenges into opportunities for success.

By embedding these habits into the daily life of PLCs, we shift them from meetings about work to communities of learning. What if your PLC chose one of these habits of mind to spotlight for the next month? How might intentionally practicing it together change the way your team learns and works?