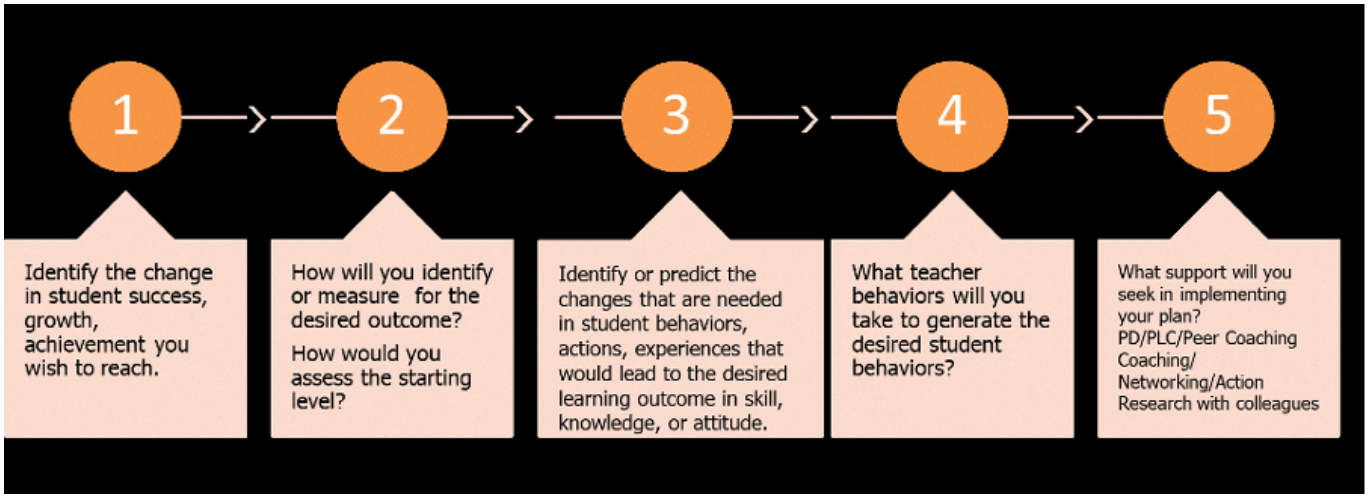
Building Professional Growth Plans Around Intelligent Failure

Throughout my career, I've often been frustrated by school, district, or state requirements that were intended to support improvement but ended up as little more than a paper chase. Professional Growth Plans (PGPs) frequently fall into this trap. In some systems, teachers—concerned they might be evaluated against their PGP outcomes—choose minimal, "safe" goals. Too often, a PGP created in May or September ends up forgotten until the following spring, pulled from a drawer just before an end-of-year review. What should be a powerful opportunity for educator learning often becomes a missed one.

Encourage Hypotheses

Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to work with several schools internationally and in the United States to explore how changing their PGP process could increase educator learning from activity. The guideline begins with planning backwards from desired student learning outcome goals.



Steps 3 and 4 in the planning process are hypothesis-driven.

In step 3, teachers form a hypothesis about what students need to do—the student learning production behaviors—to reach the desired outcome. In step 4, they hypothesize what teacher actions will best generate those student behaviors. The process of forming a hypothesis, implementing the actions of the hypothesis and collecting evidence along the way that either supports or challenges the hypothesis, produces teacher learning.

A hypothesis is an "educated guess" that emerges from a set of underlying assumptions. It's a belief that taking these actions would create a desired outcome. Articulating and justifying assumptions starts the learning process. The growth plan should outline the path that the teacher will take to investigate the hypothesis. When an implemented plan identifies the hypothesis as faulty, a new learning may lead to a modified hypothesis. So, learning from faulty or proven hypotheses can continue the drive to increased teacher and student success.

Encourage Intelligent Failure

A recent post from The Learning Curve, ***"How to Find Success With the 4 Conditions of "Intelligent Failure,"*** introduced me to the work of Amy Edmondson, a professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School, and her four criteria for failing intelligently. These are failures that teach us something new or improve us in some fashion. Intelligent failures are seen as necessary and even desirable in settings where **learning and innovation are important**.

"Whereas I am in favor of minimizing the basic failures and trying to catch and correct all the problems that lead to complex failures, I think it's a good

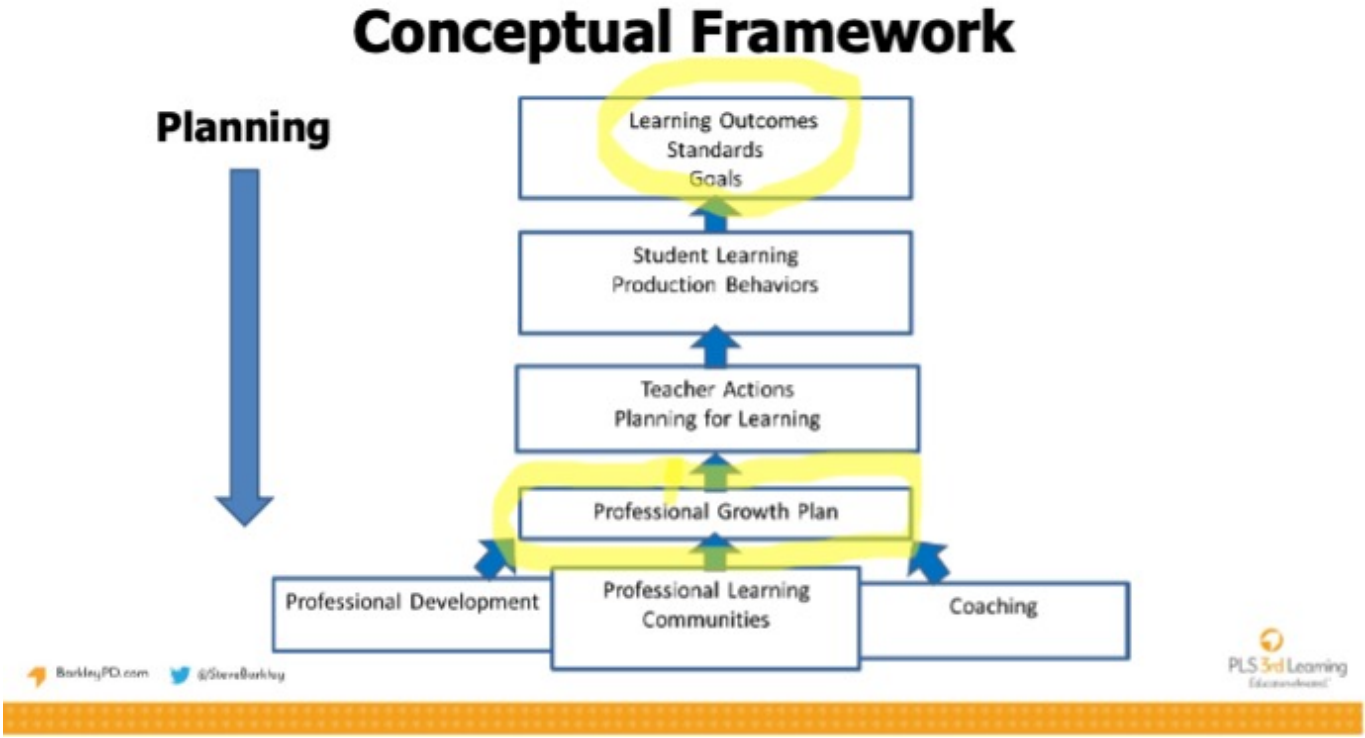
idea to have more intelligent failures."

(Amy Edmondson)

According to Edmondson, to call a failure intelligent, it must meet four criteria that I see closely tied to approaching professional growth plans through a hypothesis approach.

Criteria #1 – **Be in pursuit of a goal**.

This fits with my backward planning process that always begins with desired outcomes for students.



Criteria #2- **New Territory; I am not sure what to do.**

Criteria #3- **Not a random guess but hypothesis driven**

These two criteria identify why I describe professional growth goals being different from what I sometimes call discipline goals. With discipline goals, the educator knows what to do and sets a goal to drive their performance to carry out the practice.

Discipline Goal Example

I know that feedback needs to be timely, so my goal is to return students' work with feedback within 3 days of the time they have submitted it.

With professional growth goals, I have an idea about what might work to reach my goal.

Hypothesis Goal Example:

I want to increase student learning and mastery by having students invest more continued effort applying feedback that they have received on their first drafts of assignments. I am wondering if my feedback was more inquiry based, (providing questions rather than suggestions) if it would trigger reflection on the students' part and increase their agency and engagement in continued learning.

Criteria #4- **Failure small as possible; Just big enough to learn from it.**

In most cases with professional growth hypothesis plans, the worst thing that could happen is that progress toward the goal was not achieved. There is very minimal chance that a practitioner's plan would achieve less than the current practice. Observation and collection of evidence throughout the process would lead to modifying or dropping the hypothesis along the way. While perseverance is important, so is knowing when to modify or walk away from a hypothesis.

"If you want to have more intelligent failures in your life, in your work, essentially, you have to think like a scientist. They have trained themselves

to not just tolerate failure but to really welcome the lessons that each failure brings.”

(Amy Edmondson)

If you are coaching someone in framing their professional growth plan, these questions from Edmondson provide a good starting point.

- **What am I really hoping to achieve? What would be a clear indicator of progress?**
- **What do I currently know about how to achieve that goal?**
- **What do I not know?**
- **What might I try next?**

When we frame professional growth plans as a space for thoughtful experimentation rather than performance evaluation, we empower educators to learn boldly. Intelligent failure isn’t a setback—it’s the path forward.