When Working Together Becomes Learning Together

Recently, I was preparing a 30-minute kickoff for a school district entering its second year of professional learning community (PLC) implementation. During the first year, teachers had discovered many of the benefits that come from having dedicated time to work with colleagues. They shared strategies and resources, problem-solved around student needs, developed greater consistency across classrooms, and built stronger professional relationships.

Those are important outcomes. But they raised another question for me: When does a professional working community become a professional learning community? Teachers can work together very effectively without necessarily learning together. A team can coordinate lessons, share materials, develop common assessments, discuss students, and solve immediate problems. All of that is valuable. But the L in PLC asks for something more of us. It's why I stress the PLC question, "What do our students need us to learn?"

PWC	PLC
Sharing ideas and resources	Jointly investigating teaching and learning
Helping each other get work done	Helping each other learn
Focus on tasks and activities	Focus on student learning
Planning instruction	Studying the impact of instruction
Sharing strategies that worked	Examining why, when, and for whom strategies worked

Schools need both. The issue is whether time designated for professional learning moves beyond getting work done to generating new learning.

As I prepared for the district's second year of PLC work, I developed a six-part framework to help teams move from identifying a student need or desired outcome to engaging in a collective inquiry process.

Goal – What change do we want to see in student success? This could be overall growth in a content area or growth for an identified group of students who are currently underperforming. In addition to content standards, the goal might focus on critical life skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, or critical thinking.

Student learning-production behaviors needed – What would students need to do differently to produce the desired outcome? Students cause student achievement. What students do as learners—thinking, practicing, questioning, persisting, collaborating, revising—produces their learning.

Hypothesis – What do we believe teachers might do differently that would increase the student behaviors needed to produce the desired outcome? The hypothesis connects changes in teacher actions to anticipated changes in student learning production behaviors.

Teacher moves – What specifically will we do differently to test our hypothesis? These are the instructional actions, strategies, prompts, structures, or responses that teachers will intentionally implement.

What might we look for? – What evidence would indicate that student learning behaviors are changing? These signs provide early indications of progress. If they aren't appearing, we have reason to revisit our hypothesis and teacher moves rather than simply waiting for the eventual outcome.

What is the PLC learning? – What are we discovering about the relationship between our actions and students' responses? What seems to be working, for whom, and under what conditions? How can we use that learning to determine what we try next?

Here is an example of how the framework might unfold around a goal of increasing students' problem-solving attempts before requesting teacher help or giving up. Notice that the PLC doesn't begin by deciding what teachers should do. It first

identifies what students need to do differently and then builds a hypothesis about the teacher actions that might produce those behaviors.

Goal	**Students will increase their problem-solving attempts before requesting teacher help or giving up.**
Student learning-production behavior needed	Students need to independently use strategies to understand the problem, make a plan, try an approach, and evaluate their thinking before they ask for help or stop trying.
Hypothesis	**If** we reduce immediate teacher assistance, explicitly teach and model strategies for getting unstuck, and make productive struggle visible and valued in our classrooms, **then** students will increasingly try multiple strategies and use appropriate resources before requesting teacher help or giving up.
Teacher moves (What we will do differently)	• **Reduce immediate help:** Pause and use wait time when students are stuck. • **Ask before telling:** Use prompting questions that guide thinking without giving answers. • **Teach strategies:** Explicitly teach and model strategies for understanding problems and getting unstuck. • **Provide tools and references:** Ensure students know what resources are available and how to use them. • **Normalize struggle:** Acknowledge and celebrate productive struggle and multiple attempts. • **Use peer resources:** Encourage students to turn to peers before the teacher. • **Provide feedback that advances thinking:** Feedback focuses on strategies, reasoning, and next steps.
What might we look for?	• Students try at least one strategy (or more) before asking for help. • Students use tools, references, or peers as resources. • Students persist longer when they encounter difficulty. • When students ask for help, their questions are more specific. • Decrease in "I don't get it" or "I give up" responses.
What is the PLC learning?	Which teacher moves (questioning, wait time, cues, scaffolds, feedback) most influence students' willingness and ability to persist and solve problems independently?

The hypothesis in this example isn't a prescription or a promise that these teacher moves will produce the desired student behaviors. It is the PLC's best thinking about where to begin. The learning comes from putting that thinking into action, observing students' responses, and returning to the PLC with evidence. Perhaps students begin persisting longer but still turn quickly to the teacher rather than using peers or other resources. Perhaps the strategy works for some students but not others. Each finding gives the PLC something new to explore.

That's why I see the framework as a cycle rather than a plan to be implemented:

Desired outcome → Student learning behaviors → Hypothesis → Teacher moves → Evidence → PLC learning → What do we try next?

Effective PLCs stay engaged in this cycle. They remain curious about what students are doing and how students are responding

to changes in teacher practice. Both evidence of progress and evidence of a lack of progress inform what the PLC decides to do next. The learning gained from that inquiry can then be applied to future teaching and learning situations.

In strong schools, that PLC learning doesn't remain within the team. It is shared across the school—and perhaps across the district—so that the learning of one group can benefit other colleagues and students.

A professional working community asks, "What are we going to do?" A professional learning community adds, "What are we learning from what we do?"

When Inquiry Becomes Everyone's Responsibility

Teachers know that curiosity fuels learning.

We intentionally design lessons that spark students' questions. We celebrate inquiry, encourage exploration, and recognize that students often learn more deeply when they wrestle with uncertainty rather than simply receive answers. A classroom where students wonder, question, and investigate is a classroom alive with learning.

Yet somewhere between the classroom and adults learning and planning together, something often changes.

During coaching conversations, PLC meetings, professional learning, data reviews, and school improvement planning, the questions often become fewer. Conversations move quickly toward conclusions. Teams feel successful when they reach agreement, even if they haven't fully explored the possibilities. Rather than lingering in uncertainty, we often rush to eliminate it.

Perhaps that's understandable. Uncertainty can feel uncomfortable.

But what if that discomfort is exactly where learning begins?

If curiosity fuels student learning, why wouldn't it fuel adult learning?

Many of the structures we create for adult learning unintentionally reward reaching conclusions more than exploring possibilities, certainly more than curiosity. Instructional coaches, teacher leaders, PLC facilitators, and school administrators all ask questions to promote reflection and dialogue. Yet perhaps the greater challenge is not asking better questions ourselves. It is creating conditions where teachers begin asking one another the questions that deepen everyone's thinking.

As I was considering this tension, I read a business article describing how organizations unintentionally train future leaders to stop asking questions. Becky Cantieri writing in HR Drive, describes the need to create opportunities for

discussion before answers are expected because learning often happens in the conversation, not after it.

“……when we reward fast answers over exploration, we lose more than curiosity. We lose one of the primary ways people learn, collaborate and innovate together”

I often describe coaching as creating an environment where people become comfortable with productive discomfort. The discomfort comes from recognizing that our first explanation may not be our best explanation, that another perspective may change our thinking, or that we don’t yet understand what students are experiencing. We can relieve that discomfort by quickly agreeing on an answer, or we can stay with it long enough for curiosity to generate better questions.

Asking thoughtful questions is an important facilitator and leadership skill. Creating a culture where colleagues routinely ask thoughtful questions of themselves and one another is a hallmark of a leaderful organization.

When exploring with teachers, “How do students learn the questioning process needed to promote their own critical thinking?” I suggest this strategy that I’ve called “the question before the question.” It reminds students that before answering an important question, they often need to ask themselves more questions.

Imagine a teacher preparing students for a debate on the question, “Should 18-year-olds have the right to vote?” Rather than beginning with opinions, the teacher begins with inquiry.

“Before tomorrow’s discussion, I’d like each of you to come prepared with ten questions that you think we should be asking ourselves and one another. As you create your questions, consider three categories: What do we think we know? What are we sure we know? What do we know we don’t know?”

The next day, students work in small groups, sharing their

questions and identifying those they believe will be most important for guiding the discussion. The questions are collected and posted for everyone to see. At this point, no one is trying to answer them or determine which are best. The purpose is to broaden the group's thinking before narrowing it. As the discussion unfolds, students naturally return to the posted questions, using them to challenge assumptions, explore evidence, and consider new questions and perspectives.

Notice what happened. The teacher didn't create the questions that drove the discussion. The students did. The teacher designed the conditions for inquiry without owning the inquiry itself.

What if we designed PLC conversations the same way?

Imagine a PLC preparing to examine common assessment results. Instead of arriving ready to explain the data or recommend interventions, team members receive this invitation before the meeting:

"Please review the assessment results and come prepared with three to five questions that you believe our team needs to

explore before we decide what these results are telling us. Consider: What do we think we know? What are we sure we know? What do we know we still need to find out?”

The meeting begins by collecting everyone’s questions, not everyone’s answers. Similar questions are grouped together into themes, but no attempt is made to answer them. Instead, the posted questions become a thinking framework for the team’s exploration of the data. Throughout the discussion, the posted questions remain visible, prompting participants to revisit assumptions, explore evidence, and sometimes answer one question while discovering two new ones.

Why are questions collected before they are discussed?

Because the first question often changes the second.

The first answer often eliminates the third.

Collecting the questions first preserves the team’s curiosity before it gets narrowed by the conversation.

The shift is subtle but significant. Rather than relying on the facilitator to ask the questions that deepen thinking, the team begins taking collective responsibility for inquiry. Curiosity becomes distributed across the group, making it more likely that understanding—not simply agreement—drives the team’s decisions.

Coaches, facilitators, and school leaders still play an essential role. They model curiosity, protect productive uncertainty, and design experiences that help colleagues become increasingly responsible for the inquiry.

When inquiry becomes everyone’s responsibility, curiosity becomes part of the culture rather than the skill of the facilitator. That’s when a PLC moves beyond being a meeting and becomes a true learning community.

Teachers Providing End of Year Feedforward

The end of a school year is often treated as closure. Yet for learners, it is also a transfer point. Students leave carrying far more than content knowledge and grades. They carry beliefs about themselves as learners, strategies that helped them succeed, habits they developed, and questions they still hold about their abilities.

During the past year, I worked with a group of K–12 teachers exploring feedback practices that positively impact student learning. As we held our last session, we examined how feedback at the end of the school year could function as feedforward. What did students learn about themselves and about how they learn this year that they can use to increase their success next year? What kind of information can teachers provide next year's teachers that will support teaching and learning? PLC facilitators, instructional coaches, and principals might use some of the following prompts as teachers explore the end of the school year.

“As the year closes, what have students discovered about how they learn best that they can intentionally carry into next year?”

Students may carry forward:

• Beliefs about themselves as learners
• Confidence
• Motivation
• Learning strategies
• Habits of work and thinking
• Learner identity (the stories students tell themselves about who they are as learners)

Reflection helps students recognize that successful learning is not accidental. It grows from strategies, habits, persistence, and self-awareness that they can continue strengthening. Teachers might engage students in reflecting on the past year with these sentence stems:

• I learn best when…
• A learning or work strategy that works especially well for me is…
• A strength that I developed this year that will help me next year is…

• A learning habit I need to continue developing is…
• I want to find a way to get better at…

Teachers can also consider giving students individual feedforward using some of these sentence stems:

• A strength I see you bringing into next year is…
• A strategy that works well for you is…
• A learning habit to continue developing is…
• One area for continued growth is…

Teachers can also provide feedforward that supports continuity of learning for colleagues receiving students next year. What feedforward can teachers make available to next year's teachers in addition to content skills and knowledge that may empower future teaching and learning?

I have always been a strong advocate for teachers communicating and supporting teachers who will guide their students' learning during the next school year. It's part of my strong belief that teaching truly is a team sport. I've suggested that peer coaching should occur in classrooms of teachers with students you will likely work with next year and in classrooms of your students from last year. I have encouraged end of the year goal setting where PLCs meet across grade levels and teachers who had students this year work with next year's teachers to set learning goals to work from as the new year begins. (Vertical End of the Year Goal Setting, blog) Whenever possible these exchanges should be conversational, which generates much clearer communication and sets the stage for continuing conversation in the next year.

I have had some teachers tell me that they would rather not have input from previous teachers. Why do you think that might be? My guess is that they have received negative descriptions that interfered with beginning positively with a new student. End-of-year feedback can unintentionally become a label students carry forward rather than an invitation toward future

growth. Often that type of input has little to no value in a teacher’s planning. It might sound like this:

- Low ability
- Weak writer
- Struggles with math
- Unmotivated
- Behavior issue
- Parents were difficult

Descriptions that label students rarely help future teaching and learning. Descriptions of how students learn often do. More helpful feedforward might sound like this:

- Learns best when modeling is visible
- Benefits from wait time before responding
- Thrives when given choice
- Benefits from visual supports
- Takes leadership in group work
- Avoids risk until confidence develops
- Persists through challenges
- Benefits from structured entry routines

Here is a feedforward organizer that we explored.

- This student brings… (strength)

Jason brings strong conceptual understanding to discussions and participates actively with partners. He shares thoughtful ideas orally and has grown in confidence contributing in small-group academic conversations.

- This helps them succeed… (strategy)

Previewing vocabulary before new units, providing visual organizers, and giving opportunities to rehearse ideas orally before writing help Jason participate more fully and transfer his thinking into written work.

- They’re continuing to work on… (growth edge)

Jason is continuing to develop confidence initiating writing independently and expanding written responses with supporting details as he transfers his strong oral language into written expression.

• Something that motivates them is… (engagement insight)

Collaboration and clearly modeled expectations increase his willingness to take risks with new language and participate more confidently in academic tasks.

As another school year closes, students will leave our classrooms carrying more than grades, completed assignments, and report cards. They will carry beliefs about themselves as learners.

• Some will carry confidence.
• Some will carry uncertainty.
• Some will carry strategies that helped them succeed.
• Some will carry hesitations about risks still not taken.
Our feedback contributes to all of these.

Perhaps that is why end-of-year feedback deserves to become feedforward.

When students reflect on how they learn best, where they have grown, and what they are still developing, they build ownership for the learning ahead. They begin the next year with greater metacognition and a stronger sense of agency.

When teachers share strengths, successful supports, and growth edges with next year’s teachers, transitions become smoother and more instructionally responsive. Learning continuity replaces learning restart.

Feedback, then, is no longer confined to a lesson, a unit, or even a school year.

It travels with learners.

Fidelity to the Program or Fidelity to the Purpose?

School leaders often express concern when teachers resist implementing a newly adopted curriculum with fidelity. The assumption is understandable: If we selected the program carefully, why wouldn't teachers follow it? A recent Phi Delta Kappan article, "Educator Resistance to Curricular Control," suggests we may be asking the wrong question.

Instead of asking why teachers resist fidelity, we may need to ask: "What are teachers trying to protect?"
The Kappan authors researched teacher resistance to curricular control and identified several responses teachers make when required curriculum conflicts with their understanding of students' needs:

• strategic compliance- teacher complies, but has private concerns often producing frustration
• strategic compromise- teacher blends their own interest, knowledge or materials with the mandated curriculum
• strategic redefinition- teacher resists in their own classroom and presses others to push for change, perhaps in PLC, department, or district committee
• overt resistance- teacher may openly refuse (sometimes overlooked by administration)
• exit from the school or profession- teacher may seek a position more closely aligned with personal beliefs

Teachers resist losing influence over decisions that affect students.

Research shows that most acts of teacher resistance are closely related to the level of program fidelity that is required. As demand for curricular fidelity increases, so do acts of principled resistance.

(Huddleston, Talley, Edgington, Colwell-Kappan)

In my coaching experience, when I hear what appears to be resistance, I've learned I need to become more curious rather than more directive. That idea was reinforced on a podcast I recorded Becca Silver, the founder of The Whole Educator and the designer of the Resistance Remedy. She posed that "Resistance isn't refusal. It's a signal of unmet needs." That requires coaches' questioning and listening to help diagnose the unmet needs.

Silver describes a paradox. *"We look for the teachers to be critical thinkers. We want them to think critically about what's going on in their classrooms. And yet, when a change comes down the pipeline that they didn't choose, they're expected to comply with it. Some teachers respond, "Okay—you want me to do this? Not a problem. I'll do it." Some teachers grapple with whether they agree or disagree, or if they think they'll be successful or not. This grappling sometimes appears as resistance."*

The Real Issue May Be How We Define Fidelity

When leaders say, "Implement with fidelity," teachers often hear, "Follow the script."

Resistance frequently emerges when fidelity is framed as compliance rather than as protecting the learning design that is focused on improving student outcomes. In earlier work on coaching and program fidelity, I explored how implementation strengthens when teachers understand not just what to do, but why the new design matters for learners. The idea of fidelity

to purpose builds directly on that understanding.

Can we communicate fidelity as commitment to the purpose rather than compliance with the program?

I believe that consistency in implementation improves when teachers understand:
• What the program is designed to change?
• Which elements are essential?
• Which decisions can remain professional choices?
• What evidence should appear if the program is working?

The Kappan article points out that perfect procedural fidelity is rarely realistic. Teachers will adapt. So, the important question becomes, ”Are teachers adapting away from the purpose—or toward it?” A shift—from fidelity to procedure toward fidelity to purpose—can change conversations and teachers’ responses.

Resistance can become useful information if coaches and leaders consider what concerns a teacher is having about student learning. Teachers’ concerns often relate to:

• pacing that doesn’t match learners
• developmental readiness
• cultural responsiveness
• engagement levels
• previous successful practices
• instructional relationships they don’t want to weaken

Seen this way, resistance is not obstruction. It’s feedback.

When we introduce a new curriculum program, we should be inviting teachers to join us in shared vulnerability. A request to implement, question, observe, and report out along the way encourages teachers to be members of the district team focused on maximizing students’ success. I believe the word fidelity belongs inside this vulnerability conversation. For the evidence and data from the teachers’ observations, student

engagement and learning assessments to build systemic understanding, fidelity of purpose is critical.

These three questions are initially critical to explore with teachers:

- What must remain consistent—and why?
- Where is teacher judgment expected?
- What student evidence will tell us the program is working?

Coaches can increase teacher engagement by exploring these questions:

- What student thinking should we see if this program is working?
- Which elements seem essential for producing that thinking?
- Where do you feel the program aligns strongly with your learners?
- Where are you noticing tensions?
- What evidence should guide adaptation decisions?

The implementation of new curriculum and/or instructional strategies should create an opportunity for increased team building across a school system. Fidelity is important—and unlikely to be built through supervision alone. When curriculum supervisors, instructional coaches, building leaders, and teachers engage as partners—sharing both responsibility and vulnerability—a fidelity to purpose can emerge that strengthens a continuous learning community serving students.

School Structure Matters Less Than a Focus on Teamwork

A recent article, "**The schools where even young children change classes**," posted by the Hechinger Report had me go back and revisit a blog I wrote over 15 years ago that explored the same topic. My blog, "Platooning," explored an article from Harvard Education Letter that described:

"Platooning (or departmentalization) as nothing new. It's what middle and high schools have been doing for ages—divvying up instruction according to subject area, with students rotating to different rooms headed up by different teachers for different subjects. What is new is applying that idea to elementary schools, long the bastion of a one-teacher-per-classroom model."

Exploring the pros and cons of departmentalizing, the Harvard report noted that elementary school teachers are trained to be generalists who spend the entire year with one group of about 25 kids and teach them all the subjects. Those favoring the platooning strategy identified the raising standards, especially in math and science, as requiring teachers to receive more specialized professional development in one or two content areas versus trying to develop the expertise to teach all the content areas.

Meanwhile, the conventional wisdom had been that younger students benefit from the stability and continuity provided by having the same teacher every day all day for the whole year. Some feared that teachers making individual choices when teaching all subjects might emphasize some "favorite" contents areas over others.

Now, more than 15 years later, the Hechinger Report shares, *"As schools contend with a decades-long slump in math scores – exacerbated by the pandemic – some are turning to departmentalizing even for very young students. In recent years, more elementary schools have opted to departmentalize some grade levels in an attempt to boost academic achievement. The share of fourth and fifth grade classrooms operating on this schedule has doubled since the year 2000, from 15 percent to 30 percent in 2021. Often, that means educators will specialize in one or two subjects at most.*

Departmentalizing may be particularly important for math: Studies have shown that some early elementary school teachers experience anxiety about the subject and question their ability to teach it. Educators also say that the curriculum and standards for math and English in the early grades are changing rapidly in some districts and have become more complicated over time. In a departmentalized setup, it's also far less likely that math instruction will get shortchanged by an educator who prefers spending time on other subjects."

"But while some schools swear by this model, the research on it is mixed." (Hechinger Report)

As I read my thoughts shared years ago, I realized my thinking hasn't changed. There are many factors such as your school size, number of students at a grade level, and experiences of your staff that would influence the decision to structure as departmentalized or self-contained. In either structure, the key to increasing teachers effectiveness – and generating increases in student success – is **"teaching being a team sport."**

- **Shared Accountability –** All teammates must accept responsibility for student success in all content areas. If we departmentalize and I teach reading and social studies, the students' math scores are mine. If we are self-contained and I teach all subjects, all the students at this grade level are mine. That's the purpose of our PLC.
- **Trust –** Teammates must know each other and their work well enough to support each other with students and parents. If departmentalizing, my morning with a group of students needs to include getting them excited about the afternoon with my colleague. If self-contained, we need to know all the students in order to plan for all of them to be successful. Parents need to see our confidence in each other when they meet with us individually and collectively.
- **Knowing Students means** – If departmentalized I must dedicate time with my colleagues who observe and know my students from a different perspective. I need to uncover how students' approaches to learning are similar and different as they move from reading to science. If my colleagues are accountable for student success in my self-contained classroom, they need to observe teaching and learning in my classroom.

In departmental or self-contained settings principals and instructional coaches should continually consider that they are dealing with a team more than an individual teacher. They

should be meeting with the team when discussing student concerns. A principal should be asking questions of individual teachers that communicate his/her expectations that they are functioning as a team. If departmentalized, asking the social studies teacher how the writing students do for her matches the writing teacher's assessment. If self-contained, a meeting about reading scores should be held with the grade - level team strategizing rather than with individual teachers.

In both structures, teachers should be observing in each other's classrooms to see student similarities and differences in each other's classroom as well as within content areas. Since teaching teams will often have common planning times, you might arrange for teams to cover for each other so that learning activities can be observed. (Third grade teachers cover for 4th grade teachers to observe and then 4th covers 3rd.)

Regardless of structure, the deeper question is whether educators and those who lead them shift their thinking from "my students" to "our students." That mindset doesn't emerge by chance. It is shaped by the actions of principals and instructional coaches: meeting with teams rather than individuals, asking questions that surface shared responsibility, and supporting teachers in learning about students together. When leaders consistently reinforce that student success belongs to the team, it's likely that any structure will be modified to best meet teachers' abilities to meet student needs.

Podcast: Teacher Leaders in PLCs

Chad Dumas, the author of, ***The Teacher Leader Handbook: Simple Habits to Transform Collaboration in a PLC at Work***, explores the mindsets, skills and strategies that generate team collaboration. Chad describes the important mindsets of *"Seeing in others what they don't yet see in themselves," Being humble with a posture of learning*, and *"Spreading the contagion of joy."* How should school leaders support teacher PLC leaders?

Find *"The Teacher Leader Handbook: Simple Habits to Transform Collaboration in a PLC at Work"* here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.290] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:26.310] – Steve

Teacher Leaders in PLCs. I'm thrilled to have Dr. Chad Dumas back on our podcast. Previously, Chad explored his earlier book, "Let's Put the C in PLC." Today, we're exploring his recently released book, "The Teacher-Team Leader Handbook: Simple Habits to Transform Collaboration in a PLC at Work." In this book, Chad offers strategies for teacher leaders to strengthen their teams and truly transform collaboration into collective impact. Chad details 40 go-to moves, techniques, and strategies that transform team collaboration. Chad, welcome back to the podcast.

[00:01:18.220] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Thank you, sir. It truly is an incredible honor to be able to join you again. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:23.410] – Steve

Appreciate having you here. So for folks who didn't hear our first podcast, tell them what the "C" is that's needed in PLC's.

[00:01:33.200] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, so the term, as you know and your listeners understand, is professional learning community. So really, that was my intent, is let's make sure we've got community in our professional learning community, that it's not just paperwork and forms and doing whatever somebody else tells you to do.

That’s not what this is about. This is about creating purposeful community where the whole is greater than any of us. Although when I asked for reader reviews on it, I received reviews where folks said it also could stand for collaboration, critical thinking, communication. There was all kinds of other C’s that people came up with. But my intention was that it’s about community, building community.

[00:02:20.730] – Steve

So big for me with PLCs is a shared goal, a common goal. Does that fit for you when you’re thinking about what makes a community a community?

[00:02:33.970] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, absolutely. In the PLC at work world, we talk about interdependence. In order for there to be interdependence, true interdependence, I can’t do my job without you, and you can’t do your job without me. In order to make that happen, we have to have a goal that we’re both working on. It’s not a goal like finishing a marathon where nobody needs anybody else, but that there’s that interdependence pursuing that common goal.

[00:03:07.190] – Steve

For me, the success of the students in any teacher’s class who’s in the PLC belongs to all the members of the PLC, which is what makes us the community.

[00:03:23.850] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Exactly. As a team, it’s not my kids, it’s not your kids. It even goes beyond the team, right? To the whole school. Or if you’re a district, working to be a PLC, it’s the district. It’s all of us working together. It’s not, those are the EL kids, or those are the special Ed kids, or those are the second graders I teach, third grade – all our kids are all our kids.

[00:03:50.630] – Steve

Want to talk a little bit about the connection between your first book and the new handbook?

[00:03:57.270] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah. So the first book, “Let’s Put The C in PLC,” was geared directly towards designated leaders in the school, principals, assistant principals, maybe some coaches, some deans, that type of level. But really, it’s really geared towards what does a principal need to know and be able to do to create this collaborative environment. That was that first book. And then I had a second book, “An Action Guide,” to help with translating that knowledge into action. This third book now, while it has content that is useful for anybody who works with any adult, so if you’re married, or if you have adult children, or if you have parents you engage with, or any committee you might be on, you’ll find nuggets in here that will be helpful. However, the lens is really geared towards that teacher-team leader. And those teacher-team leaders have many different titles, if you will. Sometimes they’re coaches, instructional specialists, department head, grade-level head, team leader, facilitator, liaison. They have many different titles associated with them. But really, this is geared towards those teachers, people who are in that teacher role, who are designated to lead the work of a team.

[00:05:18.950] – Steve

How do you describe that role? Because leading a team is different than leading a group.

[00:05:29.070] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yes.

[00:05:30.220] – Steve

What are some of the ways that you define the role?

[00:05:33.910] – Dr. Chad Dumas

I start off by saying what the role of the teacher team leader is not.

[00:05:39.380] – Steve

Good place to start.

[00:05:42.060] – Dr. Chad Dumas

It's not a mini administrator. It's not a spy. It's not someone who just follows orders from a superior. Those are all things that a teacher team leader is not. What the teacher team leader is then, I define it, the role of that teacher team leader is really singularly focused. It's to ensure the effective functioning of the team in getting all students to grade-level essential standards identified by the team. So it's fairly simple in being able to say it, but not easy in execution. I think that's helpful. Let's frame what this role is, because too many times we say, hey, you're a good teacher. You should be the team leader. Now go do it and be effective. And we'd never clarify what is that role. Well, the role is, there you go, to ensure the effectiveness of the team in guaranteeing that all kids get to grade-level essential standards. Easier said than done. But if we're clear about that, now we can move forward with the remaining actions and the mindsets and assumptions that go with it.

[00:06:55.730] – Steve

So let's talk about mindsets first. What mindsets do I have to step into that teacher-leader role?

[00:07:02.320] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah. So I identify three mindsets, and I think it's important. That term mindset gets thrown around a lot. Carol Dweck popularized that in the lexicon, what, 18 years ago or so. And since then, people just use that term without necessarily understanding what it is. And so I define it based

on some others, or I think it's Mindset Works, is the organization, where they say a mindset is attitudes leading to action. So because of that, the three mindsets I propose all start with verbs. I wasn't an English teacher. I don't know if they're infinitives or what, what kind they are, but here's what they are. So there's three mindsets, and that is to see in others what they don't yet possibly see in themselves. That's the first mindset, right? And again, it's an attitude leading to action, to see in others what they don't necessarily yet see in themselves. The second mindset is to be humble with a posture of learning. And then the third one is to spread the contagion of joy. Those are the three mindsets. The book unpacks those, but there is so many layers to each of those, to see in others what they don't necessarily see in themselves, to be humble with a posture of learning, and to spread the contagion of joy.

[00:08:22.680] – Steve

Chad, I love it. I love it. I'm thinking about the mindset that administrators need who are engaged in the selection of those teacher leaders. Those certainly are terms I haven't seen in any job description.

[00:08:41.630] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Oh, no. It's something I have the extreme privilege, as you do, of working with amazing educators pretty much every day of the week. You get to see those who are more effective and the mindsets that they bring to a because these do lead to action. It's not just an ephemeral thing. It's an attitude that actually gets to… You can see this in action. You can see when people are seeing in others what they don't see in themselves. You can see when people are humble with that posture of learning. You can see when they walk into a meeting and joy spreads. I remember Dennis Sparks, a number of years ago, was in a session with him, and he said, emotions are contagious. How true is that? Knowledge is not contagious. I can walk into a room, you can walk into a room, people don't just pick up my

knowledge. I don’t pick up their knowledge, but they pick up our emotions. And so being intentional with joy, because when we’re happy, when we’re joyful, we’re more effective. The hormones in our bloodstream are flowing. The brain is able to fire more optimally. We’re connected with each other.

[00:09:55.600] – Dr. Chad Dumas

And I want to be clear, I’m not advocating for meetings to be Comedy Central. This is not what we’re talking about. We’re talking about a pure, true, authentic joy that comes from being with each other and doing good work.

[00:10:10.790] – Steve

Well, I have to tell you what hit me as you walk through that, if as a teacher leader, I realize that I can’t achieve what I want to achieve with kids, working in isolation, no matter how great of a teacher I am. Just looking at my personal desired outcome of student success, requires that the students are served by this amazing team. I have to have a belief in my colleagues and that belief that my colleagues and I can do something that I alone can’t do in order to make that investment.

[00:11:03.750] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, exactly. That’s where it starts. The title of this book is, “Habits.” I like that term habits because it goes beyond, while there are moves, techniques, and strategies, 40 of them, it’s beyond the actions. It starts with who we are as people. For a team leader to be effective, whether it’s a teacher team leader or a principal, anyone, this book is focused on the teacher team leader. It starts with those mindsets and who you are as a person. Otherwise, the actions don’t have life to them, or worst case scenario, become manipulative.

[00:11:44.260] – Steve

Yeah.

[00:11:45.170] – Dr. Chad Dumas

That doesn’t help anybody.

[00:11:46.820] – Steve

Absolutely. You’ve really got me digging in here because I’m actually working with a client currently that’s looking at rolling out PLCs next fall for the first time in their system. I have the great joy of actually working with them before they’ve implemented it.

[00:12:10.190] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Oh, that’s awesome.

[00:12:11.470] – Steve

Usually, you and I find the role of going in trying to patch together over the mistakes that were made over a bunch of years, particularly by people who aren’t even here anymore. This is a fresh group, and you’re really giving me some insights of things things to encourage them to look at that I don’t know that I would have thought of. So your three mindsets have really settled in for me.

[00:12:42.000] – Dr. Chad Dumas

That’s awesome. It’s an honor to be able to provide some insights for you.

[00:12:46.320] – Steve

Well, when you and I spoke earlier, we talked about the importance of psychological safety and building capacity. And now I really see those items fitting into those mindsets. So you want to expand a little bit on psychological safety and building capacity?

[00:13:04.760] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, absolutely. I define the role of what the teacher-team leader is, and then I identify three responsibilities. Again,

very rarely do you see the responsibilities of the teacher-team leader laid out in job descriptions or even informally. I just make it very explicit. The three responsibilities are, first of all, to make it psychologically safe. Second of all is to build capacity. And then third of all is to do the work. And what I find in my work is that many times people are focused on doing the work, that third responsibility. And I believe, and I think the research bears out, that that's actually the least important of the three responsibilities. And this book does not touch on that. There's plenty of amazing resources out there for teams and teacher team leaders to help them do the work of what it takes to be an effective professional learning community and a team in that professional argument. So what this book hones in on is the first two responsibilities: psychological safety and building capacity. So the first one of psychological safety, the research I pulled from was a lot from Charles Duhigg, who did a study that was published in the New York Times, I think, 2016, where it was called the Aristotle Project.

[00:14:25.520] – Dr. Chad Dumas

And Google, the corporation, wanted to find to find out what makes an effective team. At that time, they had, I think it was 160 or maybe 180 teams, and they wanted to find out what is it about one team that is effective and another isn't. And of course, they went into it with some hypotheses about what might make for an effective team. Some of those hypotheses were things like experience, people who had more experience or less experience. Another hypothesis was people who have higher levels of expertise in what they're doing. Another one was people liked each other. People got good snacks. You can imagine all of the hypotheses that were at play. And what they found is that really none of those things mattered. What made for an effective team was to two things, both related to psychological safety. One is the degree to which members exhibited social sensitivity with each other, that they read each other's body language and their cues from their

intonation and their facial expressions in their eye contact or lack thereof. So social sensitivity. And then the second thing that they found is teams that were effective had equity in turn-taking.

[00:15:42.000] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Everybody spoke, well, roughly the same amount of time. There wasn't anybody who dominated, and there wasn't anybody who was silent, but there was equity of turn-taking. Amy Edmondson has done a whole heck of a lot of work on this area as well, and so I pulled in some of her research as well. But those are the two big ideas. And so that idea, the responsibility of the teacher-team leader to make it safe, goes back to, how do you read the social cues of each other so you can be sensitive to that? How do you help others in the team do that? And then, how do you ensure that there is equitable turn taking? That's where those 40 moves, techniques, and strategies come in, because those are the things that build social sensitivity for you as a teacher-team leader that you pay attention to. Things like, gesture, intonation of voice, breathing, establishing group rapport, how you paraphrase and pose questions for folks, the use of the pause, which is, by the way, the sing out of about 50 nonverbal communication patterns that we have as human beings is the single most powerful nonverbal move we have.

[00:16:54.850] – Dr. Chad Dumas

The pause influences respiration, it influences heart rate, it influences blood pressure. Mostly, it gets us breathing, which enables blood then to get to the prefrontal cortex as opposed to the amygdala where folks can tend to go. That's where these moves, techniques, and strategies are about building that psychological safety. First responsibility. And then the second responsibility is building capacity, which is helping people understand why we're doing it and what we're doing, which really gets to the strategy. So the moves and techniques are about the social sensitivity, and then the strategies are

really about the psychological safety. And then the strategies are really about building that capacity of each other to engage in the work.

[00:17:38.930] – Steve

Want to label one or two of those strategies for us?

[00:17:42.900] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah. And this is on… So your listeners can go to the SolutionTree website or to my website, and there's free reproducibles, and there's a table. It's called table 2.1 that lists them all. So people can find that as a free reproducible. Of course, they can buy the book and dig into it more, but that one table, 2.1, really lists it. And so the strategy… So I distinguish between moves and techniques, which are things that you do yourself as a teacher-team leader, and strategies are the things that we do together. And each chapter goes through that. And then I further break those down into what do you need to do to get started, like some basic things. And if you've got them going great, you'll probably still get some tips here. Getting going. And then the next chapter is, okay, how do you build momentum? And what are some moves, techniques, and strategies to do that? The next chapter is overcoming obstacles. And then the final one is refining your skills. And refining your skills is all just moves and techniques. There's no strategies in there. So in terms of strategies, things like the physical arrangement of the room.

[00:18:52.250] – Dr. Chad Dumas

That's a getting started thing that many times people don't think about. We just go into the room and we sit down whatever the chairs are. The physical arrangement, just like the physical arrangement of a classroom, impacts how the adults engage with each other. And so let's make sure that we have that physical arrangement set so that we can be effective. Another strategy is establishing norms, ensuring that we have

clear roles. Starting meetings with an inclusion. This is one of my favorite strategies. When I was a high school principal. I had a teacher come to me early on in my first year, and they were so kind and sweet. And at the time, I was really offended, but in hindsight, I was really grateful that they were so frank with me. They came to me and said, “Chad, nobody cares about your meetings.” [laughter]

[00:19:41.070] – Steve

[laughter] Pretty brazen.

[00:19:42.600] – Dr. Chad Dumas

I love her, and I am so grateful that she did that because it’s true, isn’t it, though? Nobody cares about anybody else. The only person that cares about the meeting is the person who’s holding the meeting. People are coming in and they’re thinking about the email they just sent or the interaction they had with the kid or the phone call they make to their spouse or the flat tire they had this morning. Nobody is thinking about your meeting. So what we have to do is start by getting people thinking about the meeting. And I’m not talking about an icebreaker. Icebreakers tick off half the people. I’m talking about meaningful ways to quickly get our mental energy focused in the room, to get everybody’s voices in the room, and to build community as we connect with each other in the content. So that’s one of my favorite strategies. But those are a few of the strategies.

[00:20:28.320] – Steve

It sounds like changing it from my from our meeting to our meeting.

[00:20:31.780] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Exactly. Yes. I love that. Thank you.

[00:20:35.810] – Steve

That’s really what you’re describing.

[00:20:38.660] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yep, absolutely.

[00:20:40.910] – Steve

So there’s a phrase that I frequently run across whenever I’m working in the teacher leadership area, and that is the phrase middle-level leaders. Teacher leaders being described as middle-level leaders, suggesting that they have this role to play between the administration and the other members of the staff. You see that applying here? You see ways that you’re looking to address that?

[00:21:14.790] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the premises of this book is really that you cannot control other people. You can only control you. That’s one of the assumptions that I raise. I raise five assumptions that I propose are helpful. And one of those assumptions, you can only control you. And you can influence others, which is where the moves and techniques come into play. Through my breathing, through my use of a third point in a frozen gesture, through my developing group rapport, through our use of laughter and humor, through celebrations. These are all moves, techniques, and strategies that I can use to influence other people. And what I found is that they do influence other people, but sometimes there’s some folks that require a little bit extra assistance. So the last chapter of the book is maybe it’s my favorite chapter, because what I did for a period of time as I was stewing about what would be in this book and how to approach it, I would ask teacher team leaders, what are the challenges that you have? And they would share them with me. And so that last chapter is a compilation of all those challenges that those teacher team leaders share with me and some potential approaches of how to

approach those, not because you can't control them, but you can influence them.

[00:22:35.510] – Dr. Chad Dumas

And of course, it pulls in the learning throughout the book. So it references, hey, this in this chapter, this in this chapter. And the last challenge is what if I've done all this and it's still not working? In that case, don't feel bad, first of all. It happens. But second of all, your job, let's go back to the responsibilities. Your job is not to be a mini administrator. Your job is not to be a supervisor and a snitch. At some point, if you're not able to influence others because you can only control you, but you can influence others, at some point, you may have to get an administrator involved. And I provide some suggestions for how to do that. So let's not confuse, though, that you're not an administrator. But let's also make sure that you are building your own skills of influence as you help to move the team forward in ensuring that all kids get to grade level essential standard.

[00:23:34.210] – Steve

So let's talk about that for a minute or two. What are things that administrators and instructional coaches should be doing to support team leaders in PLCs?

[00:23:50.050] – Dr. Chad Dumas

In terms of supporting teacher team leaders, I think the first thing is to be really clear about what their role is because we haven't been in the past, I don't think. But first of all, let's be clear that the role is not to be administrator. The role is to ensure the effective functioning of the team and guarantee all kids get to grade-level team identified essential standards. And your responsibility in doing that is to make it safe, to build capacity, and then to do the work. So I think that's the place to start, is being really clear

about that. And then I think anything that principals can do to help support those teacher team leaders in developing these skills. Many of these skills, most of them, come from nonverbal communication science, communication intelligence from the work of Michael Grinder and Kendall Zahler. And so while many of them can come naturally, they don't necessarily do. So providing opportunities for your teacher team leaders to engage with each other, to practice these, to last with each other in these clumsy mistakes, because it will be clumsy. Practicing using, for example, approachable voice versus a credible voice can feel awkward.

[00:25:07.120] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Practicing using a third point where eyes follow eyes feels incredibly awkward. That needs practice. With those who are supporting teacher team leaders, providing structured and systematic opportunities to really engage in this book and the contents of the book so that they can practice it. Because just reading about credible and approachable voice, very interesting. Actually doing it and actually doing it in the heat of the moment is very different from having read it and understand it at a conceptual level.

[00:25:41.680] – Steve

I'm hearing coaching.

[00:25:43.540] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yes, sir.

[00:25:44.720] – Steve

Coaching the team leaders on their team leader role.

[00:25:50.500] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yes.

[00:25:51.760] – Steve

Peers coaching each other. Whether it's in role plays or whether it's… Actually, I got a colleague sitting on my team meeting today to provide me with that feedback.

[00:26:06.090] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Exactly. I think having fun with it is really important. In the book, I provide quite a few different scripts of how something might go. So let's practice it and let's try it out. Let's video record it and then laugh at each other in doing it. Let's just enjoy learning. Let's try it out with our spouses and our children and our aunts and uncles and any other loved ones, people at the grocery store. I've known people who are like, you know what? I wanted to try this out. So when I was in the grocery store, I really… I tried using the approachable incredible voice just to… At extremes, just to see what would happen. Let's have fun with this. Because communications, we know, of course, there's Merabian's research has been misapplied on people now say, oh, 93% of nonverbal communication or communication is nonverbal. Well, that's this applying his research. And there is something, too – a good deal, if not the majority, of meaning is taken from the nonverbals. So let's make sure that we're communicating what we intend to communicate through those nonverbals.

[00:27:12.540] – Steve

Yeah. So I have Two thoughts here. I want to get from you the easiest way for people to contact you to follow up and find the book. But before we jump to it, I'm wondering if you've started on the next book yet because-

[00:27:29.390] – Dr. Chad Dumas

I actually have.

[00:27:31.160] – Steve

Go ahead. What's it going to be?

[00:27:34.250] – Dr. Chad Dumas

It's been proposed. That whole process takes a little while, but in the meantime, still working on it. But a colleague of mine, Kim Nichols and I, what we found is guiding coalitions, the leadership teams who are leading the PLC process in their schools, if they exist, and Bill Hall has an amazing book on powerful guiding coalitions that helps to figure out who should be on these some general parameters of what the work of that team is. What we found, what Kim and I have found in others, is that, okay, so now we have this team, now what? And so this book that we're working on is really a handbook for guiding coalitions and building principles. So now that we have this team, now what do we do? What does an actual meeting look like? We meet for 30 minutes every couple of weeks. What do we do during that time? And so, again, clarifying what is the role and responsibilities of a guiding coalition, and then what are some practical tools, protocols, if you will, to actually do the work with timelines and that thing spelled out for folks.

[00:28:41.660] – Steve

Well, as I've listened to you today, I have a thought for another book.

[00:28:46.450] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Okay. Let me jot it down.

[00:28:50.130] – Steve

I think it's being a member of a PLC. As I listen to you, the way you've laid out the role role of the administrator in setting up the PLC process within a system, now that you've done the role of the teacher leader in the system, I think there's another whole role that there's not a whole lot of PD out there on how to be an effective member of a PLC. I don't think it's happening in anybody's undergraduate education, but even worse, probably in their graduate teacher education,

about what it means to be an effective working member of a team. I got to believe that that's where the profession is headed. If you can't function effectively as a team member, you can't meet the requirements of the profession.

[00:29:58.070] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah. Well, and that reminds me that as good as a team leader is in facilitation, and there's a great quote, I don't remember who the person is, but, "great leaders use facilitation as a superpower." So facilitation is the key thing as a team leader. You can have the most amazing facilitator, but if all of the group members are dysfunctional, like you were leading to, I can try to influence, but if ultimately there could become a time when the administrator has to step in. And the other way around. If you have high-performing members, but the facilitator is junk, they're going to get further. So you're exactly right. The most impactful person is highly-skilled group members.

[00:30:46.820] – Steve

And I think building administrators need to have an understanding of what are the behaviors of being an effective member of a PLC. At some point, it's actually part of the teacher evaluation system. That evaluation in your classroom as certain set of behaviors we expect you to have. When it comes to being a member of a PLC, there's another set of behaviors. I've seen a teacher say a word during a PLC meeting and think as long as they checked in on time and stayed for the whole time, with their administrator, they're covered.

[00:31:32.910] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Right.

[00:31:35.050] – Steve

When you started with what are the expectations of the role of being a PLC leader, I think the next step is what are the

expectations of the role of being a member of a PLC?

[00:31:49.040] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah, absolutely.

[00:31:52.010] – Steve

Well, I love the work you're doing, Chad.

[00:31:55.900] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Oh, thank you. Thank you. That means a lot.

[00:31:58.960] – Steve

Tell folks best way they can follow up, stay in touch with you, find your book.

[00:32:04.770] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Yeah. So this book is published by SolutionTree. So solutiontree.com/teamleaderhandbook is the URL that takes you directly there. You can access free reproducibles from there as well. And then I also have on my website all of those same reproducibles, and actually a couple of extra ones that after publication, I was like, oh, you know what? I should put this out there, too. There's about 50 reproducibles on my website, which also then gets you in contact with me. I have a tiny URL for that. It's tinyurl.com/ttlhchad.

[00:32:52.100] – Steve

Alright. We'll stick the links to both those in the lead-in to the podcast.

[00:32:58.290] – Dr. Chad Dumas

Perfect. Thank you.

[00:32:59.770] – Steve

Thank you.

[00:33:02.590] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I’d love to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.