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Idea 1

NOT EVERYTHING WORKS, AND WE CAN LEARN FROM WHAT DOES NOT WORK IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES.



Essential Question: How can we use lessons learned from previous attempts at implementing professional learning communities to improve the quality of the teams in our school or district?

The concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) has existed in education for many decades. The phrase *professional learning community* entered the educational lexicon in the 1990s after Senge's (1990) book *The Fifth Discipline* was published. Myers and Myers used the phrase *professional learning community* in their 1995 book. Myers presented the first paper on PLCs at the American Association for Educational Research in 1996. In 1997, Hord published a white paper titled "Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement." You can see Shirley Hord talk about the origins of this idea at <https://youtu.be/ZgKrNkeiF-w> (Masood, 2021). A year later, in 1998, DuFour and Eaker (1998) published their book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work*. The rest is history. PLCs have become a common feature in schools around the world.

Unfortunately, PLCs often fail to deliver on their promise (e.g., Sims & Penny, 2015), despite the evidence that they can be an effective way to improve student learning (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008). To help leaders avoid the mistakes made in the past and to ensure they don't unintentionally contribute to the cynicism that exists about PLCs being "just another meeting" (Fisher et al., 2009), let's examine why this good idea often fails to make a difference.

1. SMART goals are not necessary for PLC success.

One mistake that leaders make is requiring teams to *always* develop a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goal. Far too often, this takes valuable time away from the conversations that teams of teachers can and should have about evidence of student learning. It can take weeks to identify and agree on a SMART goal. In some cases, leaders choose and assign the SMART goal, applying it to all teams within the school.

Yes, we need to improve student learning, and analyzing data is important. But teams work on issues that are currently challenging them, and they want the freedom to revise their focus throughout the year as they learn about their students' strengths and needs. Annual SMART goals can thwart the learning of teams, especially when the teams view the SMART goals as a compliance activity that they complete only because it's a rule. We will focus on *common challenges*, which is the term we use for the goals a team sets for itself, later in this companion guide.



PAUSE AND PONDER

How does your school, district, or organization currently use SMART goals? Is this effective? How might freeing people from this task help them focus on student learning?

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2. Course-alike teams are only one way to structure learning communities.

Conventionally, teams have essentially been “marriages of convenience,” with teachers forced to be part of a specific team based on what they teach. The logic for this was that teachers only could talk with colleagues who taught the same thing as they did, which would allow people to share and examine data about the same learning expectations.

There are so many problems with this. For example, in many secondary schools, teachers teach more than one class, such as World History and U.S. History, or seventh- and eighth-grade English. Which meeting should they attend? And what happens to the discussions about learning in the classes for which the teacher does not attend team meetings? Also, what should leaders do with the singletons: the lone elementary PE teacher or art teacher? Or the high school teacher who is the only one who teaches calculus or chemistry? And what about all the specialists: counselors, speech and language specialists, behavior specialists, and so on? What should they do? Further, this structure fails to capitalize on the power of vertical alignment and the conversations that teachers can have across grade levels or across departments. We'll focus on forming teams later in this companion guide.

PAUSE AND PONDER

Currently, how are PLC+ teams configured at your site? How do singletons collaborate with other educators? How often and how effective are these arrangements? What ideas do you have for future configurations to enhance PLC+ teams' impact?



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3. Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) cannot be the default solution when students do not respond to the instruction.

From our perspective, PLC and RTI/MTSS are too closely aligned. Yes, some students need interventions. However, the percentage of students who are sent to intervention continues to increase, and the risk is that teacher teams abdicate their responsibility for those students. Note that we said “sent to intervention” rather than “receive intervention.” In too many places, RTI/MTSS and special education are places where students are sent to—to other teachers, assistants, or specialists—and thus the general education teachers no longer have responsibility for their learning.

The whole point of a school’s learning community is to develop collective responsibility for students’ learning. The team is responsible for *all* of the students they serve. The team can access interventions as needed to meet students’ needs, but it is the team that remains responsible. Services should not override responsibility for students.

Further, when RTI/MTSS and PLC are too closely linked, teachers do not focus on providing necessary opportunities for student learning or on removing barriers to student learning because the model suggests that when students don’t learn, the only answer is intervention somewhere else. We’ll focus on barrier removal and opportunities to learn later in this companion guide.

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PAUSE AND PONDER

At your school, is RTI/MTSS used as a fix-it strategy to defer responsibility for students who aren’t making the expected progress? How might teams coordinate, time, and share the responsibility to collaborate with other teams (such as MTSS, Special Education, Student Success Team, and others) in order to accelerate student learning?

4. Common formative assessments are not the only way to talk about evidence.

Teacher teams should talk about evidence of student learning. Teams, and individual members of those teams, need to determine the impact their efforts are having on students. But common formative assessments force teachers to collaborate only with people who teach exactly the same thing they do, which we have already discussed as problematic. In addition, the development of common formative assessments takes time, and not all of us are skilled at assessment construction. That time is probably better spent focused on what we can do with the evidence, rather than on debating items on the common assessment.

To combat this, some districts develop common formative assessments for teachers to use. In this case, teachers can become cynical; some may even teach the test rather than the content so their students appear stronger than they are. Again, we believe that teacher teams should discuss evidence, and we recognize that there are a lot of different sources of evidence that can inform teacher practice. However, research indicates that the vast majority of conversations in data teams are focused on explaining away the data rather than discussing what actions can be taken to address the realities of the data. In fact, Evans et al. (2019) found that 85% of the minutes in data team discussions were focused on dismissing the data, with the majority of comments falling into four categories:

- Student behavior (e.g., “not paying attention”)
- A mismatch between the assessment demands and the student (e.g., “he’s an English language learner”)
- Students’ home life (e.g., “they don’t read at home”)
- Suspected or established underlying conditions (e.g., “I think she’s dyslexic”)

Thus, only 15% of the time was devoted to actions that teachers and teams could take to ensure student learning. We’ll focus on data discussions later in this companion guide.

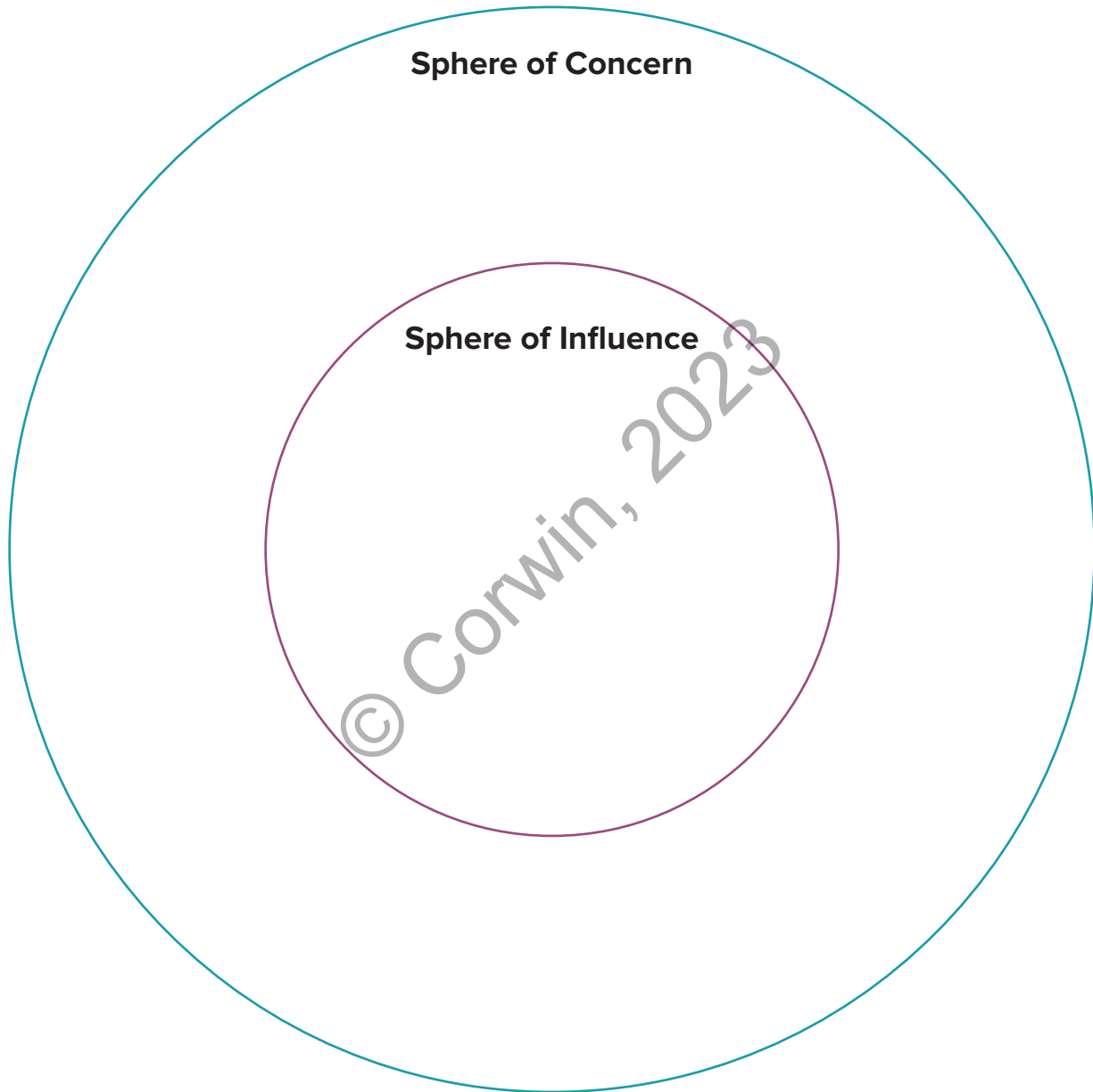
PAUSE AND PONDER

How and when do the PLC+ teams at your site discuss student learning? What types of evidence do teams currently collect? What ideas do you have to keep conversations focused on what teachers have control of?



SELF-ASSESSMENT

Use the circles below to analyze the teams in your school or district. What is in your sphere of influence or control, and what is in your sphere of concern? Throughout this guidebook, we'll ask you to work on aspects that are within your sphere of influence.



Visit the companion website at
resources.corwin.com/PLC+forleaders
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