



Facilitating Effective Adult Collaboration and Conversation

Communities that Undermine Learning

An article that describes how three community prototypes – Toxic, Laissez-Faire, and Congenial – serve as obstacles to team functioning and, as a result, limit improvement efforts.

communities that undermine learning

School leaders must distinguish between PLCs that genuinely serve greater student learning and groups that protect mediocre performance by both students and adults.

Period 2 common planning time at River High School: Five minutes after the last bell, Team 9B teachers are amiably catching up on one another's weekends while waiting for the perpetual stragglers to arrive.

Maria, the team leader, seems to be the only one with a sense of urgency. "People, remember our norm of getting started promptly," she implores. "Let's go. We need to spend a few minutes planning April's field trip. Then we have to talk about how we're doing with the interdisciplinary writing prompts."

Before Maria has finished distributing a short agenda, Principal Knox arrives. He's on his daily walkthrough this period and cannot stay, but he wants to encourage the group with a "little pat on the back."

Al Knox is proud of his Professional Learning Community initiative at River High School. He has provided his PLCs with common meeting time, stipends for team leader(s), and summer training in norm development and agenda setting. Compared to the fractious group of ninth-grade teachers he saw two years ago, 9B is collaborating pretty well, Al thinks. He is pleased by the congenial tone of the gathering and the

team's shared goal to improve student writing—a school priority. After a quick thanks for their efforts, Al continues his walk and leaves 9B to get on with its business.

If Al had stayed longer, the unfolding interaction might have made him reconsider his assessment. Instead of a few minutes, the field trip discussion took more than half the meeting. A tangent into a student discipline issue chewed up another 15 minutes.

Team 9B got to the main agenda item with 10 minutes left. At that point, two teachers admitted that they were not getting to the writing prompts despite previous promises. John "never could find the time" and Tina complained about "doing English in science." Colleagues' comments were dismayingly solicitous:

"That's OK, John. Get to it when you can."

"Listen, your low group isn't going to be able to write much anyway. Maybe you could just experiment with one of your good sections."

No one expressed dismay over how time had been used or the failure to address the

By Alexander D. Platt and Caroline E. Tripp

one agenda item that would have a direct impact on student performance. No one made a passionate plea about the serious gap in writing achievement. No one took a colleague to task for violating the team agreement, thereby granting tacit permission to the notion that individual autonomy takes precedence over responsibility to the group.

If we measure collaboration in terms of impact on teaching and learning, the meeting was a failure, and the group's performance inadequate.

False hope

Team 9B is one of many learning communities with the worthwhile mission of improving student learning springing up all over California. Some do indeed fulfill the promise of professional learning set forth by DuFour and others. But as Michael Fullan warns us from his research, “[We] have found that professional learning communities are being implemented superficially. They give the educators involved a false hope of progress.”

To fulfill the promise of professional learning communities, skillful leaders need to do more than simply marshal resources and cheer faculty on from the sidelines. We must distinguish between groups that genuinely pool their mental effort to develop organizational intelligence in the service of greater student learning — what we call Accountable Communities — and groups whose interactions block improvement and protect mediocre performance by both students and adults.

Three different prototypes fall into the latter category: the Toxic Community, the *Laissez-Faire* Community and the Congenial Community. Although they may look different, each group:

- accepts or tolerates low performance, inertia or lack of contribution from its own members;
- expects and accepts low performance from groups of students who have somehow been labeled as less worthy or less capable;
- attributes poor student achievement to external factors like family background, lack of financial support for schools or community conditions;
- derives benefit from, and therefore ex-

erts effort to sustain, conditions that favor adult comfort or convenience over student needs;

- has little or no collective experience with, or models for, effective problem-solving skills and strategies.

Real schools are full of such underperforming groups, many of which parade



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as “effective teams.” As you examine the profile descriptions that follow, and the suggested approaches for taking on such groups, consider how you would use them to diagnose and help Team 9B. Consider whether any of the groups in your school display similar characteristics and what you and your leadership team might do.

The Toxic Community

As their name implies, toxic groups are distinguished by their “negative take” on almost all aspects of schooling and by their real or perceived ability to stifle initiative, punish heretics (anyone who takes a leader's side on an issue), derail emerging solutions to problems, and blame everyone but themselves for mediocre student or adult learning.

Sarcastic humor and weary cynicism

bind vocal members together in an “us versus them” or “this too shall pass” stance that serves to protect members from external demands and to drive non-subscribers to silence or to the safety of other spaces.

Toxicity may result from patterns of district bungling, including lack of supervision and feedback or lingering resentments over past injuries, such as strikes or destructive bargaining sessions. Toxicity is also fueled by emotional exhaustion from years of “initiative overload” and unsupported effort and continual stirring of a few “ringleaders” who derive gratification and a sense of purpose from being aggrieved.

By nature guarded and suspicious, toxic groups do pay attention to what the organization wants from them and to the ways in which organizational goals or changes in practice might affect their traditional rights and privileges. They often use the union contract to defend the status quo.

Rather than embracing promising ideas on their merits or supporting leaders who want to find ways of trying out new practices within the framework of the contract, Toxic Communities vote for and encourage union leaders who take a tough, protective stance.

Finally, Toxic Communities focus on why things should not be done, cannot work or are a problem for something that already exists. Thus, members most often present themselves as blockers to improvement efforts and as individuals whose job is to sort, select and label both children and other adults.

New teacher induction programs are no match for these lethal culture builders! Challenging these communities requires a balance of listening, acknowledging and direct intervention. These highly negative cultures almost always require some changes in personnel.

Approaches for tackling Toxic Communities

- Identify the past or present causes for the toxicity (previous authoritarian leadership, residue from strikes and contract impasses, a track record of broken promises from the district).
- Build bridges before lighting fires (Lencioni, 2002). Listen to and acknowledge previous conditions and past contributions

to the current situation before asking for changes.

- Give feedback to individuals when expectations for effective collaboration are not met, but avoid attacking or labeling statements. Instead, focus on the importance of pooling knowledge to better help students and name the consequences for students when adults are unable to collaborate.

- Adopt and consistently use structures that equalize participation in discussion and minimize opportunities for haranguing and bullying.

- Use transparent, data-based processes for identifying student learning problems and setting priorities for action, rather than unstructured decisions by acclaim or assertion.

- Honor contract provisions consistently, but persist with clear non-negotiables and expectations. Do not let grievances distract from your focus.

- Remove the most negative individual or a destructive ringleader from the group.

The *Laissez-Faire* Community

While Toxic Communities are often bonded by their sense of injury or by a common vision of “the other” as enemy, groups we have designated *Laissez-Faire* share little beyond a desire or belief in their right to be left alone to “do their own thing.”

In *Laissez-Faire* Communities, teachers or administrators co-exist pleasantly but are disconnected from institutional goals and from each other’s work and work concerns. Members are largely motivated by personal needs either for comfort and convenience or for instructional autonomy; no shared purpose or vision drives their interaction.

If Toxic Communities snarl and snort in response to requests for collaborative problem solving, *Laissez-Faire* Communities sniff and sigh with martyred resignation. The school’s designated goals do not appear to have immediate relevance or utility. Rather than adversarial, as in Toxic Communities, relationships with leaders are often collusive: “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Laissez-Faire Communities frequently evolve in heavily decentralized districts or schools in the absence of strong leadership. They also develop when leadership defines its role as protection of cooperative members and motivation through favors and deals. These communities tend to support mediocre learning because they see it as an inevitable result of student limitations and because examining and subsequently changing one’s core practice would violate the fundamental value of autonomy.

Approaches for intervening with *Laissez-Faire* Communities

- Identify the practices and forces that are supporting autonomous actions, deal-making, secrecy or low expectations.

- Determine when and how the group interacts well to solve a problem (even if it is low-level) and build on established structures or norms.

- Establish clear problem-solving structures and make problem solving a central part of meeting agendas. Use time efficiently.

- Assess how much time is wasted on unimportant topics; be judicious in identifying the most important problems for the focus of collaborative action.

- Monitor how time is spent during group meetings; collect agendas and minutes.

- Help teams use standards and feedback to define a common learning problem, identify a change goal for itself, and establish how it will monitor its own performance.

- Offer options for initial structuring of joint work. Looking at student work, developing common assessments and examining student test results could all be productive starting points.

- Have much of the work done in course-alike pairs or trios where there is compelling rationale for working together.

The key to improving the collaboration of these autonomous units is to help them see that joint work will help them be more effective in their own classrooms.

The Congenial Community

Congenial Communities are “happy” or “nurturing” places to work. These groups send off the false aura of smoothly func-

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tioning teams. Considerable effort goes into building and maintaining adult relationships and comfort, but unlike Toxic or *Laissez-Faire* Communities, they have no difficulty with requests to collaborate.

Members usually enjoy one another's company and have positive or neutral relationships with the leaders. Mediocrity is sustained because members do not challenge one another's ideas and practices in service of better student learning, because getting along comes first.

Problems are quickly reduced to simplistic statements and solutions, and no real effort is made to examine data to get at the core practices that are no longer serving children's needs. Congenial Communities especially can be by-products of leader shortcomings.

Recognizing that good relationships and trust create effective teams, administrators often overstress the role of congeniality and inadvertently send signals that getting along is paramount. Such leaders see themselves as being responsible for keeping peace and harmony, and worry that any attempt to press for genuine changes in practice will "undermine school morale" without producing results.

Thus, everyone understands that naming an ineffective practice goes against established cultural norms, and difficult questions about poor student or adult performance are swept under the rug.

Approaches for intervening with Congenial Communities

- Lead with relationship building and the need for acceptance and affiliation, but use data to reframe focus from adult comfort to students' losing out.

- Help congenial groups be more accepting of conflict by adopting protocols that assist members in managing conflict (see National School Reform Faculty Web site, www.nsrffharmony.org).

- Invest in training that helps members to identify their own preferential styles and conflict-averse behavior, and analyze the consequence of "burying" difficult information or important disagreements.

- Invite community members to examine their own performance against criteria for a

Books Worth Reading

Six Secrets of Change; How Leaders Learn

Reviewed by George Manthey, assistant executive director, ACSA Educational Services

“Give me a good theory over a strategic plan any day of the week,” is the opening sentence of Michael Fullan’s latest book. It is a guide for both business and education leaders who want to make their organizations “survive and thrive.” Six “secrets” are offered as a theory of action, with the caution that leaders be open to “surprises or new data that direct further action.”

The secrets are not likely to surprise you as they deal with the way leaders treat employees, define purpose, build capacity, learn, share information, and create organizations that learn. Fullan cautions that for the secrets to work they must all be nurtured, as none are sufficient in isolation of the others. For me, the six secrets provide a useful filter for examining the efficacy of decisions and actions.

“The Six Secrets of Change” (2008), by Michael Fullan. Published by Jossey-Bass.

Gordon Donaldson credits Joanne Iskin, a principal in California’s Lennox Unified School District, for insisting that this book get written. In it Donaldson provides a model (Interpersonal-Cognitive-Intrapersonal or I-C-I) that he has found useful for understanding performance and learning. The book provides real examples of how teacher leaders and principals have used the I-C-I model to provide a framework for their own leadership of learning. Donaldson asserts, “Persistent hurdles to leader effectiveness are the result, in part, of gaps of leaders’ interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive knowledge sets.”

One aim of the book is to help leaders understand that their focus can not be their own skill set, but must include increasing their understanding of how what they do affects the “knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practice” of those they are leading. Donaldson also reminds us that the highest purpose of leadership of schools is to lead in ways that increase student learning.

“How Leaders Learn” (2008), by Gordon A. Donaldson. Published by Teachers College Press.

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collaborative and accountable community and identify goals for growth.

Team 9B is certainly not a Toxic group. It is probably more a hybrid. It has qualities that mark it as *Laissez-Faire*: spending time on topics not focused on teaching and learning and embracing individual autonomy as a primary value. The aversion to conflict and the cultural norm of guarding the friendly climate marks it more as a Congenial team.

The exact classification, however, is less important for leaders than being clear about how to monitor, supervise and coach Team 9B to work in ways that are more likely to impact student learning. This requires that leaders recognize malfunctioning teams and adopt a toolkit of intervention strategies listed above. They also need a clear vision of what a high-performing team looks like.

The Accountable Community: The vision of excellence

Accountable Communities are the much desired but rarely achieved ideal for team functioning. They are demanding and sometimes uncomfortable places to work. Labeling a community as “accountable” means its members have moved beyond merely working together well in service of students in general. The team takes direct responsibility for monitoring its own actions and for calling others on behaviors and stances that are not helpful to the mission.

Accountable Communities impact the consistency and quality of members’ classroom instruction more than teams functioning at other levels. Accountable Communities live a “no quarter, no excuses” existence, where every choice a teacher makes is open to examination and revision when there are students who have not yet learned what they need to learn.

Could you describe any of your teams as accountable? Do you have some good teams who could stretch to this level of performance?

These communities are bonded and motivated by the glue of common goals, common agreements, common assessment and/or common students. They do not depend on external authorities to police them; they are able to connect their classroom work to larger organizational goals.

Becoming accountable

We can’t expect all teams to become accountable overnight, but we do expect leaders to actively confront Fullan’s worry that “professional learning communities are being implemented superficially,” by taking four actions.

1 Be committed to strong measures of accountability and intervention in cases of malfunctioning teams. There will be no spontaneous outbreak of improvement without intervention, feedback and coaching.

2 Give “life and clout” to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession Standard No. 6: Developing as a Professional Educator, especially 6.3 — Working with Communities to Improve Professional Practice (“Inspect what you expect”). Use existing evaluation standards to reward contribution and recommend growth where needed.

3 Develop clear definitions and images for what constitutes a high functioning, “accountable” PLC that impacts student learning. Share these descriptions with teams so they can self assess their performance.

4 Collect data on what is actually happening. If the principal had really observed Team 9B, he would have been able to give growth feedback to the team leader or the entire team.

Accountable Communities are the much desired but rarely achieved ideal for team functioning. They are demanding and sometimes uncomfortable places to work.

Because of the emphasis on problem solving and the constant fine-tuning that goes on in Accountable Communities, the impact of their teaching on student learning is less random. Through their skilled problem solving, they relentlessly address learning gaps (concepts not yet understood and skills not yet mastered) for both adults and students.

There is a willingness to move beyond the most obvious solutions and responses to problems and seek other explanations and opportunities. They let go of treasured but non-working approaches when faced with data indicating their lack of success. When the knowledge of the group falls short, they seek external expertise.

Accountable Communities do not collaborate on everything. They are very selective and are known to push back against

principals who have gone overboard on collaboration. Ironically, these groups are marked as much by what they don’t collaborate about! Some have described this as “relentless focus” on matters of instruction and learning (see box above).

If school leaders want to maximize the power of PLCs, they need to not just support, but monitor and coach. Otherwise, we will have a few great teams, fewer great schools and many students performing below our hopes. ■

References

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This article was adapted from “The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning” (2008).

Alexander D. Platt and Caroline Tripp are authors of the best-selling book, “The Skillful Leader: Confronting Mediocre Teaching” (2000) and the new book, “The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions that Undermine Learning” (www.ready-about.com). Platt is also a seminar speaker at ACSA’s upcoming Leadership Summit, Nov. 6-8 in San Diego.

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