

Five Dysfunctions of a Professional Learning Community

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What Is a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

“The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it.” —*Rick DuFour, Bob Eaker, and Becky DuFour (2007)*

From Isolation to Collaboration

As I have watched teachers and administrators make the shift from teaching in isolation to operating as a collaborative team, I have witnessed several commonalities across schools. This article addresses five dysfunctions of a PLC. The purpose of this article is to describe how dysfunctional behavior can interfere with the school’s commitment to the learning of each student.

All Teams Are Potentially Dysfunctional

Lencioni (2007) wrote, “Like it or not, all teams are potentially dysfunctional. This is inevitable because they are made up of fallible, imperfect human beings.” This is nice to know because educators frequently struggle with teamwork, sharing resources, and working with a coworker who views teaching and learning from a different lens.

Five Dysfunctions of a Professional Learning Community

Dysfunction #1: Lack of Norms

Team norms are the foundation of a PLC. Some teams feel like they can operate without norms, but conflict or a dysfunctional team member usually highlights the purpose of norms. When teams operate with norms, each member of the team understands how to communicate, how shared decisions will be handled, when to arrive for meetings, and how to professionally disagree. I have observed teams that developed norms five years ago, but they fail to revisit the team norms. When a new teacher moves from a different grade level or from another school district, it is difficult for the teacher to participate in the PLC because the team norms are akin to living and working in a different country or culture.

Solution:

- [Developing Team Norms](#)

Dysfunction #2: Lack of Team Goals

“You must have long-term goals to keep you from being frustrated by short-term failures.” —
Charles C. Noble

“If you’re bored with life—you don’t get up every morning with a burning desire to do things—you don’t have enough goals.” —*Lou Holtz*

Successful teams establish goals and when the team begins to succeed or fail, members return to their established goals. Establishing a school or district-level PLC will not mean that a team will meet its goals any more than a basketball team will go undefeated by having a daily practice. Some teams fail to establish goals because they believe that teaching hard and developing rigorous lessons will support student achievement. Other teams have a lack of trust, and they do not wish to share instructional strategies or discuss student misunderstandings. A team without goals will lack purpose, urgency, and a destination. It is difficult to celebrate a small win without established goals.

Solutions:

- [Setting Team Goals](#)
- [Team Action Planning Template](#)

Dysfunction #3: Lack of Trust

According to Lencioni (2007), a lack of trust “occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses, or needs for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible.”

A PLC that operates with trust will ask

1. Which students seem to struggle with the key concepts and skills identified by the team?
2. Which skills or concepts do I struggle to teach?
3. If our students do not do well on the state writing test, then what strategies should we incorporate at our grade level? At the grade levels prior to our grade?
4. Some students are struggling with note taking and organization skills. What can teachers do to support students who are struggling in school, due to a lack of study skills?
5. Our students are struggling with Algebra I. Are there areas of the curriculum map that could be revised to support teaching and learning?

Solution:

- [Team Trust Survey](#)

Dysfunction #4: Lack of Communication

In the traditional high school, the department chair(s) met with the building principal and then returned to the department meeting to tell the other teachers what to do. Top-down leadership is drastically different from the shared leadership that occurs in an effective PLC. Communication problems occur when teams operate without established norms or goals. Some communication barriers occur because teachers fail to take advantage of e-mail, discussion threads, Web 2.0 tools (such as blogs, wikis, Google docs), and other methods for communicating between meetings. Watch a [humorous video](#) on the importance of clear communication between team members.

Solutions:

- [Evidence of Practice in Action](#)
- [How Teams Function](#)

Dysfunction #5: Lack of Essential Learning Outcomes

Effective teams develop and agree to provide all students with essential learning outcomes. In the absence of learning outcomes, students receive a disjointed curriculum experience. Why do some teams skip this step if it is such an important part of teaching and learning? From my observations, developing essential learning outcomes involves trust, conflict, debate, time, and the ability to come to consensus. If teams lack one or more of the items listed in this article, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to identify essential learning outcomes. Swan (2010) wrote, “Learning outcomes refer to the skills, knowledge, and attributes students should have upon completion of a particular course or program of study.” For additional resources on developing learning outcomes visit the [Brigham Young University Center for Teaching and Learning](#).

Solutions:

- [A Guide to Developing Measurable Student Learning Outcomes](#)
- [Example of Essential Learning Outcomes](#)

REFERENCES

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