



# THE 5 HABITS OF EFFECTIVE PLCs

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By Lois Brown Easton

**H**abits are, according to Stephen R. Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “the intersection of knowledge, skills, and desire” (2004, p. 47). They emerge from a deep understanding of what to do (knowledge), how to do it (skills), and why it must be done (desire).

Beginning with the why — or desire — as Simon Sinek (2009) suggests is the way school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) begin curating a set of habits. The most compelling desires for which a professional learning community develops a habit are student learning and well-being. This article describes the knowledge and skills that professional learning community members need to create a habit out of their desire.

Habits serve educators as signposts of progress toward achieving their desires. They are interim indicators of a professional learning community’s success. Ultimately, of course, professional learning communities demonstrate effectiveness by sharing both qualitative and quantitative data that document improved student achievement and well-being.

In the meantime, demonstration of habits serves notice that professional learning communities are success-oriented. Professional learning communities that manifest the habits described in this article are likely to be effective and to achieve what their members desire.

Here, in no particular order, are five habits that professional learning communities can cultivate to be effective.

## **1 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE ACCOUNTABLE.**

The most successful professional learning communities hold themselves accountable both formally and informally. Informally, professional learning community members hold themselves accountable for their own learning and

for the learning of everyone in their professional learning communities.

They also hold themselves accountable for doing something about their learning — implementing changes in their classrooms or in the school as a whole that make a difference for students. They also hold themselves similarly accountable to others outside their own professional learning community — those in other professional learning communities, those in the school as a whole, and in the district.

Professional learning communities with informal accountability:

- Establish and adhere to working agreements or norms that advance learning and doing;
- Report to professional learning community colleagues what they are doing (as well as challenges they encounter) as a regular part of professional learning community meetings;
- Communicate outside their professional learning communities by voice mail, email, blogging, or other means about what they are learning and doing;
- Keep track of and reflect on what they are learning and doing through a portfolio system; and
- Make short presentations at other meetings (faculty, grade-level, and subject-area meetings as applicable) about progress and periodically (perhaps twice a year) display their portfolios and make presentations of learning to others.

Formal professional learning community accountability is distinguished from informal because it centers on goals or purposes that the professional learning community has identified.

Professional learning communities give notice that they are being accountable formally by broadcasting goals or purposes within the school and, perhaps, the district; sharing progress toward meeting those goals or purposes; and sharing challenges and addressing them through peer coaching (perhaps with members of other professional learning communities), protocols, or other inquiry processes.

They demonstrate that they have met goals with data, student work, test scores, interview or survey results, teaching plans and materials, or other concrete indicators. They invite others into their classrooms to see the results of their work. They write reports, which they publish locally or broadly, and make presentations about their results.

## 2 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS MAKE EFFECTIVE USE OF IMPORTANT SKILL SETS.

Professional learning communities that have acquired and use these four skill sets are more likely to be successful:

- Understand the change process;
- Facilitate learning and implement changes based on learning;
- Share leadership; and
- Use dialogue.

**Understand the change process.** Successful professional learning communities make part of their learning the study of a variety of change processes, and they regularly refer to at least one model as they learn and implement their learning.

Popular change models include: Hall and Hord's (2001) Concerns-Based Adoption Model; Rogers' (1962) diffusion of innovations; Bridges' (2009) three-phases model; Tuckman's (1965) model of how groups change (forming, storming, norming, performing); and Ambrose's (1996) model describing the essential elements of change and how the absence of any one of them can thwart change.

Professional learning communities can study any of these and other change models and adopt the one that makes the most sense to them in terms of explaining what professional learning community members are going through and — if changes will affect others in a school — what they will go through.

The important thing for professional learning community members to understand is that change is not a smooth, straight road across a blank countryside. It is more likely to be curvy, with several U-turns, numerous potholes, and scores of environmental threats.

**Facilitate learning and implement changes based on learning.** Professional learning community members need the ability to facilitate their own learning and implement processes. One or more members — or the whole professional learning community — can learn and practice these skills. Among the subskills that facilitators need are: Organize the professional learning community for learning and doing; create a learning and doing agenda; use activities to open and close gatherings and process learning; give and get feedback; and reach consensus.

Professional learning community members can gain these skills in a variety of ways. Sometimes district staff members can

## RESOURCES ON FACILITATION SKILLS

**Danielson, C. (2009).** *Talk about teaching! Leading professional conversations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Delehant, A. (2007).** *Making meetings work: How to get started, get going, and get it done.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & NSDC.

**Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1999).** *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

**Murphy, M. (2009).** *Tools & talk: Data, conversation, and action for classroom and school improvement.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

provide training; otherwise, professional learning community members can study the art of facilitation online or read books (see resources list above).

**Share leadership.** Professional learning community members need to develop their understanding of shared or distributed leadership, especially if there are role differences among members. Members need to understand that each of them has at least one leadership asset (see Douglas Reeves' list of leadership assets, 2006) and can play any number of needed roles.

Charlotte Danielson makes a strong case for teachers as leaders in her 2006 book, *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*. As Richard Elmore (2000) stated, "The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution" (p. 21).

It may be enough for a professional learning community to make shared or distributed leadership a topic for a meeting and use Reeves' list or other resources (see Easton, 2011, pp. 220-228). Principals who find it difficult to share leadership may need training or book study using a book such as Reeves' *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results* (2006).

**Use dialogue.** The fourth skill set may very well be the most important. Without the skill of dialogue, professional learning communities may become dysfunctional. Absent this skill, people can interrupt each other, become fractious and competitive, break into factions, use sarcasm (disguised as humor) to level each other, engage in side conversations or birdwalks, disengage entirely, and monopolize the discussion. No professional learning community needs these distractions from learning and implementing important changes to benefit students.

Dialogue differs from conversation, discussion, and debate.

It is as friendly as conversation usually is; it does not result in decisions, as discussions often do; and it has a fine balance between advocacy and inquiry, something that debate — with its automatically adversarial stances — does not have.

Dialogue sounds different. It moves at a slower pace as people try out ideas, may include silences during which people think about what they have heard before speaking, and is usually quieter than discussion, during which raised voices are common, as people try to interject their ideas, sometimes speaking over each other.

Dialogue does not come naturally. It must be learned, consciously practiced, and purposefully employed when it's important to surface everyone's ideas.

A variety of protocols (both online and face-to-face) ease people into the use of dialogue. What really helps, however, is watching dialogue in action. One way to do that is by viewing the DVD *Dialogue: An Introduction* from the Center for Adaptive Schools (2009).

### 3 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOCUS ON DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS.

Professional learning communities that ignore relationships simply delay the need to attend to relationships. It's better for professional learning community members to begin building relationships at the beginning of their work together than to wait for a crisis — an inevitability if the work is to be substantive and long-lasting.

Good relationships enable professional learning community members to develop trust, and trust is essential when the work is on what Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman call “wicked problems” — such as curriculum alignment or accountability — that aren't solvable with linear cause-effect thinking (1999, p. 225). Trust is vital when professional learning communities encounter a problem or crisis.

Professional learning communities can foster relationships that promote trust when they acknowledge and appreciate differences from the beginning, using activities such as Four Compass Points (Easton, 2011, p. 109), True Colors (<https://truecolorsintl.com/resources>), or the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory ([www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics](http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics)) to identify and value preferences members have for how they meet and work together.

Development and conscientious use of working agreements and norms help professional learning community members focus on individual and group needs. Protocols and dialogue that help members balance inquiry and advocacy preserve positive relationships.

Finally, professional learning community members need to surface and discuss behaviors that compromise trust, such as sarcasm or the inability to admit lack of knowledge. Articles by Goldsmith (n.d.) and Feltman (2001) identify these destructive

behaviors, as does the article “Plan your response to difficult participants” in the newsletter *Tools for Schools* (NSDC, 1998, p. 7).

Regularly focusing on relationships helps professional learning community members be trustworthy themselves and choose to trust others. Finally, this focus helps members develop trust in the group and its ability to achieve remarkable changes in classrooms and schools as a whole.

### 4 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOCUS ON AND CONNECT LEARNING AND DOING.

An effective professional learning community focuses on both learning and doing, and the two are related. This may seem obvious, but it can easily be derailed.

Teachers and administrators may see professional learning communities as a mechanism to implement a district-sponsored initiative. For example, a district determines that all teachers need to use Fisher and Frey's (2008) strategy called gradual release of responsibility. The district requires schools to implement this strategy, and the schools, in turn, use professional learning communities to implement the reform.

Yet teachers in some professional learning communities are accustomed to being told what to implement. These teachers will sometimes wait to be told exactly what they should implement rather than determining on the basis of passion and purpose what they want to do to improve student learning and well-being.

Another deterrent to effective professional learning communities is the attitude that professional learning communities are just business as usual. Sometimes teachers see professional learning communities as just another meeting to attend rather than an opportunity for learning and making a difference for students.

Teachers who do not see themselves as learners may be content with the status quo. Principals add to this problem by usurping professional learning community time to make announcements or attend to school business. Business as usual means that a hierarchy prevails (usually with the principal as leader) that is counter to the egalitarian culture of professional learning communities.

Finally, professional *development* has long been the norm for adult learning in schools, with educators passively being developed by other adults rather than taking on their own learning and using outside resources as needed. A culture of professional development hampers a culture of professional learning.

The learning-doing gap plagues professional learning communities as much as it does corporations (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton wonder “why knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge” (Sparks, 2004).

Planning is sometimes the enemy, with professional learning communities deterred from action as they create visions, missions, and strategic plans. In fact, other than identifying passion and purpose and creating first-step-next-step, short-range plans to accomplish their purposes, professional learning communities

**tool WHAT IS OUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PASSIONATE ABOUT?**

**DIRECTIONS:**

- Individually rate the degree to which you believe each statement to be true: 1 = absolutely true, 2 = mostly true, 3 = rarely/partially true, 4 = untrue.
- Collect and tally individual scores.
- Have a dialogue about the highest scores (untrue and rarely/partially true).
- Identify concrete evidence that supports your ratings.
- Ask yourselves: Is this what we care most about? Is this what keeps us up at night? Is this what gives us pain?
- If your answer is yes, you may have discovered your professional learning community’s passion.
- Then, consider what you need to do in your professional learning community about your passion. Your first actions may be as simple as get more concrete examples, interview students, or research this problem.
- Later, you will develop additional actions to take.

	1 Absolutely true	2 Mostly true	3 Rarely/ partially true	4 Untrue
Students in my school are achieving their potential.				
Teachers in my school are satisfied with student achievement in the school.				
School and district administrators are satisfied with student achievement in the school.				
Parents are satisfied with student achievement in my school.				
Students in my school are excited about going to school and learning.				
The culture of my school is conducive to learning.				
In my school, the conditions for learning (e.g. use of time and resources) are conducive to learning.				
We have little or nothing to improve in my school.				
What we do have to improve can be done by individual teachers working alone in their classrooms.				
Teachers feel efficacious and express job satisfaction.				
Teachers are resilient and resourceful in my school.				

should leave visions, missions, and strategic plans to schools and districts, referencing them but not spending any time in creating them for the professional learning communities.

Learning without doing something about learning — implementing strategies to improve classrooms and schools — satisfies only half of the equation. Doing something — such as implementing an outside reform — without learning is equally unsatisfactory. In the best professional learning communities, learning and doing are enmeshed.

To begin to make changes, professional learning community members will find that they need to engage in their own learning. They will discover what to do as they learn, and they will engage in additional learning as they discover the effects of their actions.

**5 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS OPERATE ACCORDING TO A STRONG SENSE OF PURPOSE, DRIVEN BY THE PASSION THEY HAVE ABOUT ACHIEVING THAT PURPOSE.**

Professional learning communities need to be driven from inside and informed from the outside. This means that professional learning communities work according to passion (related to the desire that forces habits) about making substantive change (based on data, both qualitative and quantitative) that leads to development of purposes or goals, which align with their school’s and district’s mission, vision, goals, and strategic plan.

Working according to passion and purpose — rather than on an imposed goal or purpose, which may not relate to a strongly felt need within the professional learning community

— is what makes professional learning communities effective. For example, professional learning communities are more likely to achieve success on differentiated instruction if they work from their passion about reaching all students and a purpose related to that passion than from a district-imposed requirement that all teachers implement differentiation.

It is far better that professional learning communities address a commonly held goal that all students should achieve their potential than focus on implementing someone else's solution to the problem of nonachievement. This means that district boards and administrators, as well as school administrators, must allow professional learning communities to find their own work within a general mission, vision, set of goals, or strategic plan.

It also means that district and school administrators should not try to control what professional learning communities decide to make the focus of both their learning and doing.

The figure at right shows where the other interim indicators intersect.

Professional learning communities can work according to their own passion and purposes (within school and district priorities) if they are accountable. Skills sets and trust relationships help professional learning community members determine and orient themselves toward their purposes. All four of these indicators make it possible for professional learning communities to learn and implement their learning for the benefit of students.

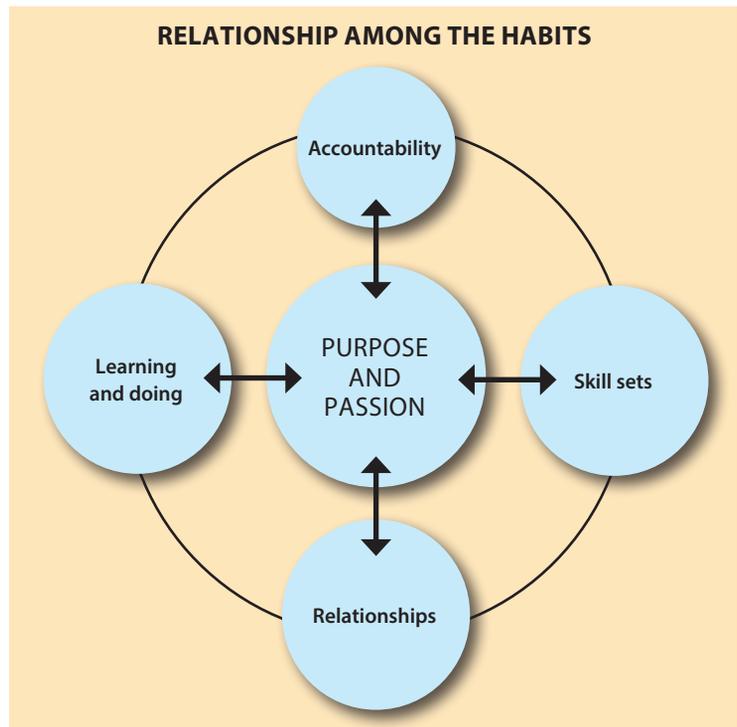
Professional learning communities should have control over not only their focus but also how they work. If, according to data of various kinds, they decide that there are too many drop-outs between 9th and 10th grade — and if it is important to the school and district to keep all students in school and have them graduate — a professional learning community can operate according to this passion and establish a related purpose.

Passion is the driving force behind effective professional learning communities. One way that professional learning community members can identify what they really care about is by sharing their worst fears and best hopes (Chadwick, 2002) about a situation, such as the dropout rate.

Passion comes from what keeps educators up at night as they think about school or what gives them pain. Responses to the survey statements in the tool on p. 28 can also help professional learning community members identify their passions.

#### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Professional learning communities that are accountable, employ various skill sets to operate, foster good relationships among members and with the larger community, operate according to passion and purpose, and engage in both learning and doing are more likely to be successful than professional learning communities that have not developed these actions into habits. And professional learning communities that demonstrate these interim indicators are likely to be successful in



terms of achieving the ultimate indicator of success: improved student learning and well-being.

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- Continued on p. 34*

This mix of learning sources can easily get mingled with and overtake whatever impact the professional learning in your organization achieves. That is not a condemnation of the program but an opportunity to learn.

Program evaluation queries should focus on collecting various data to triangulate when asking questions that matter, such as: “Looking at our interim target, how are we doing thus far, and what is the evidence?” “What do we need to improve right now to increase progress toward our stated long-range targets?” “What did the investment in this effort cost?” “What, if anything, did this program contribute that was not anticipated? What patterns are we seeing repeatedly and what might they tell us?”

## 9 GET OTHER FINGERPRINTS ON THE EVALUATION.

To do solid, credible program evaluation, you need the cooperation and collaborative thinking of other stakeholders. Avoid making all program evaluation decisions on your own, even if it seems more efficient. Just as it is important to involve your adult learners (or their representatives) in helping create a professional learning plan that affects them, reach out to get input about evaluation design decisions. Then be generous with kudos to all those who helped strengthen the evaluation.

Your colleagues all around the organization have expertise, information, documentation, student work samples, videos, and valuable stories to share. You need all of this to make your evaluation efforts credible and valued.

Keep your stakeholders in the loop from start to finish and with regular updates. Resistance to participating in data collection often stems from people sensing they have not been kept informed, listened to, or adequately recognized for their investment of time or ideas.

In addition, disdain for the results that come out of an

evaluation effort often include remarks like these, and they can sink your evaluation report: “This is all news to me.” “No one interviewed any of us.” “No one ever visited classrooms here that I know of.” “I don’t buy the notion that teacher team projects can show real evidence that they actually learned anything new from working together to analyze student work.”

## 10 CREATE DEADLINES ON YOUR EVALUATION WORK CALENDAR.

Steady progress on your evaluation path will be a challenge. You have myriad other tasks that are more pressing. They are also more predictably rewarding. What to do?

Most professional development leaders have a strong habit of mind about working backward from big deadlines and public events. Work with that established habit of mind by creating a firm deadline. Put it on your public calendar. You might even promise to give a report at a particular time and place. Prepare whatever you think will help your stakeholders sit up and take notice of your evaluation efforts — video, snapshots of students in classrooms where the new techniques are being employed, charts displaying the trends in data, and some notable quotes.

Best wishes on your journey.

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## The 5 habits of effective PLCs

*Continued from p. 29*  
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