

## Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts

The following glossary provides a brief definition of key terms and concepts as they are used in the context of this book and in the context of professional learning communities in general.

**action orientation.** A predisposition to learn by doing; moving quickly to turn aspirations into actions and visions into realities. Members of PLCs understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and reflective experience as the most effective teachers.

**action research.** A process of collective inquiry in which individuals work together to become more proficient at identifying and solving problems. The steps of action research include: (1) formulating a problem, (2) identifying and implementing a strategy to address the problem, (3) creating a process for gathering evidence of the effectiveness of the strategy, (4) collecting and analyzing the evidence, and (4) making decisions based on the evidence.

**adaptive challenges.** Challenges for which the solution is not apparent; challenges that cause us to experiment, discover, adjust, and adapt (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive challenges may also be described as second-order change.

**attainable goals.** Goals perceived as achievable by those who set them. Attainable goals are intended to document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins.

**balanced assessment.** An assessment strategy that recognizes no single assessment yields the comprehensive results necessary to inform and improve practice and foster school and system accountability. Balanced assessments utilize multiple measures of student achievement, including formative assessments *for* learning and summative assessments *of* learning. Balanced assessment also refers to using different types of assessments based upon the knowledge and/or skills students are called upon to demonstrate. Rather than relying exclusively on one kind of assessment, schools and teams develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate proficiency.

**building shared knowledge.** Learning together. Members of professional learning communities *always* attempt to answer critical questions by first learning together. They engage in collective inquiry to build shared knowledge. This collective study of the same information increases the likelihood that members will arrive at the same conclusion. Members of a PLC, by definition, will *learn* together.

**capacity building.** “Developing the collective ability—dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change” (Fullan, 2005, p. 4).

**collaboration.** A *systematic* process in which people work together, *interdependently*, to analyze and *impact* professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results. In a PLC, collaboration focuses on the critical questions of learning: What is it we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

**collective commitments.** The third pillar of the PLC foundation. Collective commitments (or values) represent the promises made among and between all stakeholders that answer the question, What must we do to become the organization we have agreed we hope to become?

**collective inquiry.** The process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together. In PLCs, educators engage in collective inquiry into more effective practices by examining both external evidence (such as research) and internal evidence (which teachers are getting the best results). They also build shared knowledge regarding the reality of the current practices and conditions in their schools or districts.

**common assessment.** An assessment of student learning that uses the same instrument or a common process utilizing the same criteria for determining the quality of student work. State and provincial assessments and district benchmark assessments are “common” assessments. However, in a PLC, common assessments are also created by a team of teachers with collective responsibility for the learning of a group of students who are expected to acquire the same knowledge and skills. Team-developed common assessments provide members with the basis of comparison that turns data into information and help individuals identify strengths and weaknesses in their instructional strategies. They also help identify problem areas in the curriculum that require attention.

**common formative assessment.** An assessment typically created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course. Common formative assessments are used frequently throughout the year to identify (1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills, (3) curriculum concerns—areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the intended standard—and (4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team.

**community.** A group linked by common interests. Whereas the term *organization* tends to emphasize structure and efficiency, *community* suggests shared purpose, mutual cooperation, and supportive relationships.

**consensus.** Consensus is achieved when (1) all points of view have not only been heard but also solicited, and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.

**continuous improvement process.** The ongoing cycle of planning, doing, checking, and acting designed to improve results—constantly. In a PLC, this cycle includes gathering evidence of current levels of student learning, developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning, implementing those strategies and ideas, analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not, and applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement.

**criterion-referenced assessment.** An assessment used to determine if a student or group of students have met a specific standard or intended learning outcome (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

**critical questions of collaborative teams.** In a PLC, collaboration focuses on four critical questions of learning: (1) What is it we want each student to learn, (2) How will we know when each student has learned, (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning, and (4) How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

**crucial conversation.** Dialogue in which “the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, p. 3). **curriculum leverage.** The skills, knowledge, and dispositions that will assist the student in becoming proficient in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines (Reeves, 2002).

**data versus information.** Data represent facts or figures that, standing alone, will not inform practice or lead to informed decisions. To transform data into information requires putting data in context, and this typically requires a basis of comparison.

**DRIP syndrome (data rich/information poor).** The problem of an abundance of data that do nothing to inform practice because they are not presented in context through the use of relevant comparisons (Waterman, 1987).

**endurance.** The quality that defines knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are expected to retain over time as opposed to those they merely learn for a test (Reeves, 2002).

**essential learning:** The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learning may also be referred to as essential outcomes, power standards (Reeves, 2002), guaranteed and viable curriculum (Marzano, 2003), essential academic goals (Lezotte, 1991), learning intentions and success criteria (Hattie, 2009), or learning expectations and tangible exemplars of student proficiency (Saphier, 2005).

**first-order change.** Innovation that is incremental, representing the next step on an established path and operating within existing paradigms. The change can be implemented by using the existing knowledge and skills of the staff. The goal of first-order change is to get better at what is already being done (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

**formative assessment.** An assessment *for* learning used to advance and not merely monitor each student's learning; the assessment informs the teacher regarding the effectiveness of instruction and the individual student regarding progress in becoming proficient. The checks for understanding that individual teachers use in the classroom on a daily basis are examples of formative assessments. In a PLC, collaborative teams also use common formative assessments to (1) identify students who are experiencing difficulty in their learning, (2) provide those student with additional time and support in a way that does not remove them from new direct instruction, and (3) give them additional opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

**foundation of a professional learning community.** PLCs rest upon a shared *mission* of high levels of learning for all students. In order to achieve that mission, educators create a common *vision* of the school they must create, develop *collective commitments* or *values* regarding what they will do to create such a school, and use *goals* as measurable milestones to monitor their progress.

**Genius of And.** The ability to embrace paradox. Embracing the Genius of And allows an individual to avoid the choice between A *or* B and to choose both A *and* B at the same time (Collins & Porras, 1997). A commitment to simultaneous loose *and* tight leadership serves as an example of the Genius of And. See also **Tyranny of Or.**

**goals.** Measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision. Goals establish targets and timelines to answer the question, What results do we seek, and how will we know we are making progress?

**guaranteed and viable curriculum.** A curriculum that (1) gives students access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class *and* (2) can be taught in the time allotted (Marzano, 2003).

**guiding coalition.** An alliance of key members of an organization who are specifically charged to lead a change process through the predictable turmoil. Members of the coalition should have shared objectives and high levels of trust.

**high expectations.** Positive inferences teachers make about the future academic achievement of their students based on what they know about their students (Good & Brophy, 2002). "High expectations for success will be judged, not only by the initial staff beliefs and behaviors, but also by the organization's response when some students do not learn" (Lezotte, 1991, p. 4).

**knowing-doing gap.** The disconnect between knowledge and action; the mystery of why knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

**Law of the Few.** The ability of a small close-knit group of people to champion an idea or proposal until it reaches a tipping point and spreads like an epidemic throughout an organization (Gladwell, 2002).

**learning.** The acquisition of new knowledge or skills through ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. Members of a PLC engage in the ongoing study and constant reflective practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

**learning organization.** “Organizations where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

**mission.** The fundamental purpose of an organization. Mission answers the question, Why do we exist?

**moral purpose.** “Acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (Fullan, 2001, p. 3). Fullan lists a commitment to moral purpose as a critical element of effective leadership and contends leadership must be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens and mobilizes the moral purpose of those within the organization.

**norm-referenced assessment.** An assessment designed to compare the performance of an individual or group with a larger “norm” group typically representing a national sample with a wide and diverse cross-section of students (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

**performance-based assessment.** An assessment that requires students to demonstrate learning through demonstration or completion of a task (for example, essays, oral presentations, open-ended problems, labs, or real-world simulations). Prior to administering a common performance-based assessment, a collaborative team in a PLC must (1) agree on the criteria by which members will judge the quality of student work and (2) demonstrate that they apply those criteria consistently—establish interrater reliability.

**power standard.** The knowledge, skills, and dispositions that have *endurance* and *leverage*, and are essential in preparing students for *readiness* at the next level (Reeves, 2002); the most essential learning or outcomes.

**prerequisite knowledge.** See **readiness for the next level of learning.**

**professional.** Someone with expertise in a specialized field; an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base.

**professional development.** A lifelong, collaborative learning process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and the school through a daily job-embedded, learner-centered, focused approach (National Staff Development Council, 2000).

**professional learning community (PLC).** An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

**pyramid of interventions.** A systematic schoolwide plan that ensures every student in every course or grade level will receive additional time and support for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills. The multitiered intervention occurs during the school day, and students are required rather than invited to devote the extra time and secure the extra support for learning.

**readiness for the next level of learning.** The quality of having acquired the skills, knowledge, and dispositions essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level (Reeves, 2002).

**reciprocal accountability.** The premise that leaders who call upon members of the organization to engage in new work, achieve new standards, and accomplish new goals have a responsibility to those members to develop their capacity to be successful in meeting these challenges: “For every increment of performance we ask of educators, there is an equal responsibility to provide them with the capacity to meet that expectation” (Elmore, 2004, p. 93). For example, principals of professional learning communities recognize they have an obligation to provide staff with the resources, training, mentoring, and support to help them successfully accomplish what they have been asked to do.

**results orientation.** A focus on outcomes rather than inputs or intentions. In PLCs, members are committed to achieving desired results and are hungry for evidence that their efforts are producing the intended outcomes.

**school culture.** The assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and guide the work of the educators within it.

**school structure.** The policies, procedures, rules, and hierarchical relationships within the school.

**second-order change.** Innovation that represents a dramatic departure from the expected and familiar. Second-order change is perceived as a break from the past, is inconsistent with existing paradigms, may seem to be at conflict with prevailing practices and norms, and will require the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). See also **adaptive challenges**.

**simultaneous loose and tight leadership.** A leadership concept in which leaders encourage autonomy and creativity (loose) within well-defined parameters and priorities that must be honored (tight). The concept has also been referred to as “directed empowerment” (Waterman, 1987), a “culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship” (Collins, 2001, p. 124), and “defined autonomy” (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

**SMART goals.** Goals that are Strategic & Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Timebound (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2005).

**stretch goals.** Goals intended to inspire, to capture the imagination of people within the organization, to stimulate creativity and innovation, and to serve as a unifying focal point of effort. Stretch goals are so ambitious that they typically cannot be achieved without significant changes in practice. Stretch goals are also referred to as BHAGs: “Big Hairy Audacious Goals” (Collins & Porras, 1997, p. 9).

**summative assessment.** An assessment of learning (Stiggins, 2002) designed to provide a final measure to determine if learning goals have been met (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006). Summative assessments yield a dichotomy: pass or fail, proficient or not proficient. Additional timely support is typically not forthcoming.

**systematic intervention.** A schoolwide plan that ensures every student in every course or grade level will receive additional time and support for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills. The multitiered intervention occurs during the school day, and students are required rather than invited to devote the extra time and secure the extra support for learning. Systematic intervention means that what happens when a student does not learn is no longer left to the individual teacher to determine but is addressed according to a systematic plan. See also **pyramid of interventions**.



**systematic process.** A specific effort to organize the combination of related parts into a coherent whole in a methodical, deliberate, and orderly way toward a particular aim. In a PLC, a systematic process reflects an aspect of the “tight” culture.

**teachable point of view.** A succinct explanation of an organization’s purpose and direction that can be illustrated through stories that engage others emotionally and intellectually (Tichy, 1997).

**team.** A group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*. Collaborative teams are the fundamental building blocks of PLCs.

**team learning process.** The cyclical process in which all teams in a PLC engage to stay focused on learning. The team learning process includes: clarifying essential student learnings (skills, concepts, and dispositions) for each course and content area; agreeing on common pacing of instruction; developing multiple common formative assessments aligned to each essential outcome; establishing specific, rigorous target scores or benchmarks that will lead to success on high-stakes assessments; analyzing common assessment results; and identifying and implementing improvement strategies. Teams address each step in the process by first building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions.

**team norms.** In PLCs, norms represent collective commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals.

**time management.** The ability to organize and execute one’s time around priorities (Covey, 1989).

**Tyranny of Or.** “The rational view that cannot easily accept paradox, that cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. We must be A or B but not both” (Collins & Porras, 1997, p. 44). Ineffective organizations fall victim to the Tyranny of Or. See also **Genius of And**.

**values.** The specific attitudes, behaviors, and collective commitments that must be demonstrated in order to advance the organization’s vision. Articulated values answer the question, How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality? See also **collective commitments**.

**vision.** A realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization. Vision answers the question, What do we hope to become at some point in the future?

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