The Case for Professional Learning Communities

Tina B. Clayton, Measurement Incorporated

Having the competitive edge in the market is the objective of highly successful businesses. The key component to attaining and sustaining the competitive edge is ". . . the organization's ability to learn faster than the competition." (Senge 1994) To learn faster than the competition, an organization must engage in purposeful and focused professional development. This paper has several purposes:

1. To define purposeful and focused professional development
2. To provide a specific plan for purposeful and focused professional development
3. To examine and expand the view of professional development
4. To make the case for integrating Professional Learning Communities as a vital part of professional development

Purposeful and Focused Professional Development

Purposeful and focused professional development is the process that identifies and enhances the skills, tools, and attitudes employees need to operate effectively, serve customers, and advance the company mission. The key word in this definition is *process*. The *English Oxford Living Dictionaries* define a process as "a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end.

Therefore, purposeful and focused professional development is *a series of steps to first identify, and then enhance the skills, tools, and attitudes employees need to operate effectively, serve customers, and advance the company mission.*

Professional Development Process

Since the professional development (PD) process is a series of action steps, an organization must be strategic with each move. Attaining and sustaining the competitive edge depends upon learning quicker than the competition.

Before the process begins, a PD facilitator should be identified and a Needs Assessment (NA) team should be created and trained. The training consists of team members learning the purpose of a NA team and how it functions. This team should consist of a representative from each department or division who:

- ✓ Is creative, and capable of developing and sharing innovative ideas with a group
- ✓ Is a delightful team player
- ✓ Is open to new ideas / strategies
- ✓ Has current knowledge of trends in the organization's area of expertise

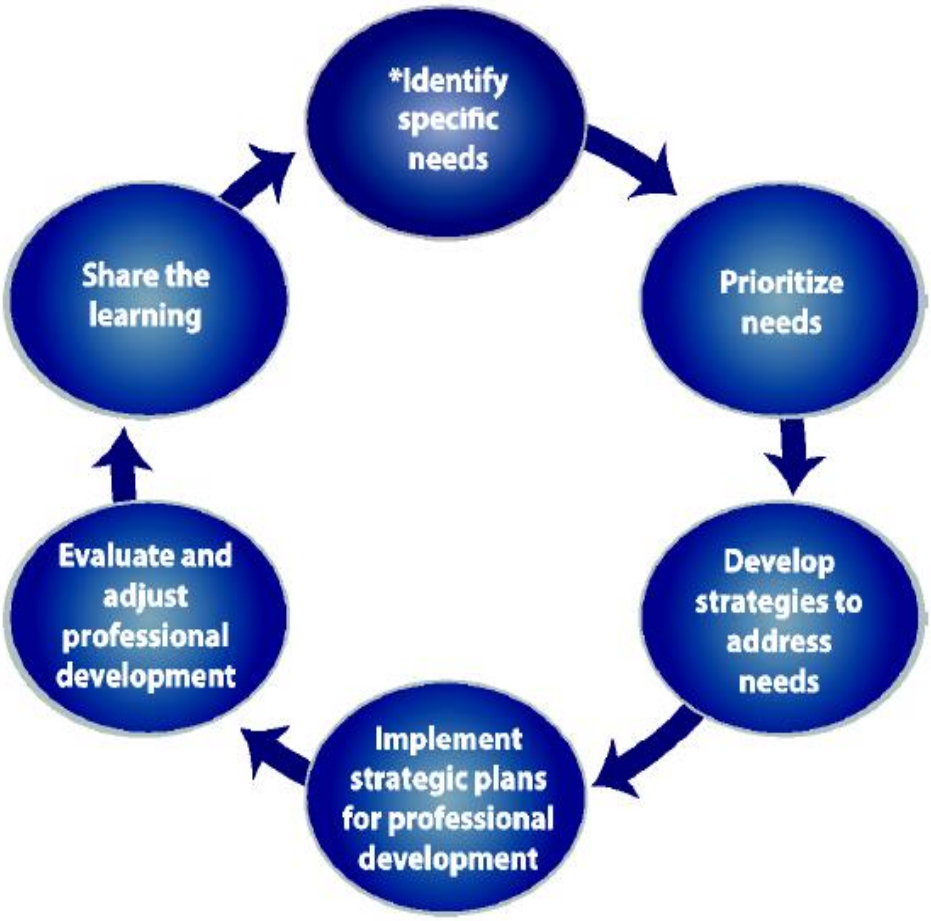
Action Step 1: Identify specific needs (gaps)

- ❑ NA team creates process of data collection
- ❑ NA team collects data
  - Data review
  - Surveys
  - Checklist
  - Observations

Action Step 2: Prioritize identified needs (gaps)

- ❑ Analyze data
- ❑ Prioritize areas that are most critical
- ❑ Prioritize areas based on organization's mission and goals

Professional Development Process



PD is a process – a continuous cycle. There will always room for improvement.

*The PD cycle does not need to start each time at the identification of needs. The PD cycle only starts over when all of the prioritized needs have been addressed.

Action Step 3: Develop strategies to address needs (gaps)

- ❑ Create a steering committee
  - ✓ Small group of leaders in the division or department
  - ✓ Leaders who know the strengths of their team members
- ❑ The steering committee
  - ✓ Defines the process
  - ✓ Designs evaluation of procedures and sessions
  - ✓ Establishes guidelines
  - ✓ Advises PD facilitator on professional development sessions

Action Step 4: Implement strategies

- ❑ Schedule courses, focus groups, sessions
- ❑ Ensure best practices for teaching adults
- ❑ Ensure content of PD is rich, is valuable, and makes a positive impact on team members and business

Action Step 5: Evaluate and make adjustments

- ❑ Examine the results of each PD session
- ❑ Questions to ask:
  - ✓ Did the PD address the identified need?
  - ✓ Does the PD need to be offered again or extended?
  - ✓ Who benefited from the PD?
  - ✓ What were the strengths and weakness of the PD?
  - ✓ What could be done differently to make the PD more effective?
  - ✓ How will this PD move the company forward?

"... efforts in these areas (a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement) must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement." (DuFour, Eaker, Many 2006)

Action Step 6: Share the learning

"Documenting professional development changes clearly will help sustain excellence even when major changes in personnel occur." (Hassel 1999)

Sharing the learning ensures that the new information, skills, and ideas are distributed to others in the organization. Sharing the learning also:

- ✓ clarifies new information
- ✓ documents decisions based on the new information
- ✓ documents how new learning will be used
- ✓ allows employees to visit or revisit periodically
- ✓ builds capacity

Below is a list of ideas for sharing the learning with others in the department or division to:

- ❑ Create a YouTube video
- ❑ Write a White Paper
- ❑ Post banners in division or meeting rooms
- ❑ Blog on organization's website
- ❑ Present at internal meetings
- ❑ Present at local, state, and national conferences

With continuous professional development that is intentionally focused, an organization's ability to lead in the market is augmented.

Professional Learning Community

Professional development is viewed by some professionals as a project or an event. Read the scenarios below:

Scenario One: An expert is hired to come to the conference room and present new information.
Scenario Two: An employee or group of employees goes to a faraway city, stays in a hotel, enjoys a few hours of rest and relaxation, and of course, attends workshops.

Both provide motivational speakers, new strategies, and useful handouts. But . . . what happens after the workshop?

Option A: The employee returns to the office or place of work excited! This person shares newly learned practices with other colleagues and applies new strategies to current assignments. Learning ends.
Option B: The employee returns to the office or place of work and puts newly learned practices to work. Learning ends.
Option C: The employee returns to the office or place of work and puts handouts in the file cabinet. Learning ends.

All the options have the same result: *Learning ends*. Organizations that are pursuing an attainable and sustainable competitive edge need a living, breathing, and thriving form of professional development.

The best, most-productive avenue for identifying and enhancing the skills, tools, and attitudes employees need to operate effectively, serve customers, and advance the company mission originated with highly successful school leaders - educators. These educators have been remarkably productive in raising academic achievement of the nation's poorest and most under-privileged students.

Dr. Richard DuFour**,** one of the nation's most distinguished educators and champion of Professional Learning Communities has found that:

"If principals want to improve student achievement in their school, rather than focus on the individual inspection of teaching, they must focus on the collective analysis of evidence of student learning." (DuFour 2013)

Professional Learning Communities provide the structure for leaders and teachers to intentionally focus on student assessment data. Once educators have identified exactly what a student understands and where the gaps in understanding are, they can intentionally plan how to address the gaps and accelerate learning.

What is Professional Learning Community?

A professional learning community is “an ongoing process in which [a group of] educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.” (DuFour, Eaker, and Many 2006)

In other words, a professional learning community is a group of educators who continuously collect data about student learning. Educators use this data to serve and teach their students more effectively.

“Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.” (2006)

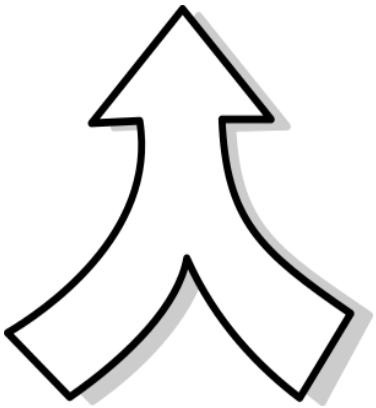
Therefore, the reason student achievement increases is because educators are continuously learning new information and strategies. This continuous learning takes place in the workplace with other educators.

Dr. Peter Senge, a renowned American systems scientist, asserts the same idea: “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results.” (Senge 1994)

To produce dramatically improved results while sustaining the competitive edge, organizations should embed learning opportunities for employees within the regular workday in the normal work site.

Professional Learning Communities are the perfect way to offer professional development in the business workplace. By combining the work of these two experts, a winning combination is formed.

Professional Learning Community



Dr. Senge — Dr. DuFour

Systems Scientist — Education Expert

A Winning Combination!

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a small group of professionals who continuously seek cutting-edge ideas and collaboratively evaluate how to best apply the new information to the work. The PLC operates under the assumption that to stay ahead of the competition, an organization must *learn faster than the competition* and *consistently produce exceptional work*.

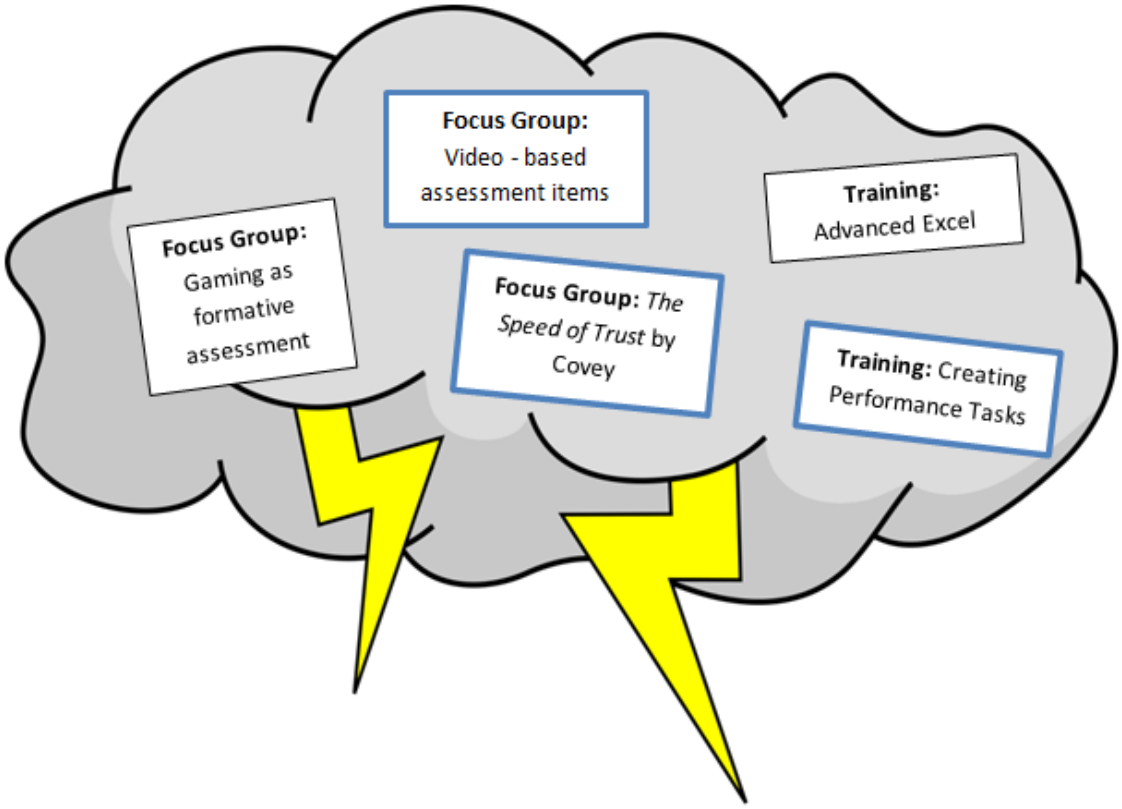
How does a Professional Learning Community (PLC) work in business setting?

A small group of people (called a focus group) conducts research on a specific idea or topic. After the research is completed, the focus group meets together and each person presents his/her findings. Then, the focus group evaluates the findings and designs how to best apply the information.

An example of a PLC in action is shown in a script found in Appendix A. This script can be used to introduce the idea of PLCs to possible NA team members. Having potential members act out the script for other potential members can help create engagement in the idea of PLCs, and may also help foster a spirit of community in the team.

A Professional Learning Community does not replace attending conferences or in-services as forms of professional development. A Professional Learning Community applies what is learned from these events. The *application* of the new learning is what initiates "the organization's ability to learn faster than the competition." (Senge 1994)

Like the water droplets form a cloud, focus groups and training sessions form a PLC. The lightning bolts represent the inevitable tension that ensues with change. However, change must occur with the application of new learning.



How does an organization make a shift in its view of professional development?

Nobel prize-winning physicist said: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Author Emily Hassel considers the traditional, static view of professional development to be insufficient. "Viewing professional development as a process, rather than as a project or event, requires a major shift in planning . . . Meaningful professional development does not take place during workshops and in-service presentations, but in the context of professional communities that have been locally developed to be responsive to [employees or a company's] needs. (1999)

Organizations must change the way professional development is perceived and received if obtaining and sustaining a competitive edge is the objective. However, making this shift will take guidance, support, and time. Most importantly, it will require the commitment of the organization's leadership. Leadership must envision, communicate, and engage in a different approach to professional development if true change is to take place.

Works Cited and Suggestions for Further Reading

The following print materials include information referenced in this paper and other helpful works for additional reading.

Ainsworth, Larry. (2010). *Rigorous curriculum design*: *How to create curricular units of study that align standards, instruction, and assessment.* Englewood, Colorado: The Leadership and Learning Center.

Covey, S. M. R. (2006). *The speed of trust: The one thing that changes everything*. New York, NY: Free Press.

DuFour, R. (2013). "The Principalship." *Educational Leadership, 70* (7), 34–40.

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work™* (pp. 2–4). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Fullan, M. (2008). *The six secrets of change: What the best leaders do to help their organizations survive and thrive.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hassel, E. (1999) *Professional development: Learning from the best.* North Carolina: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from: http://publicimpact.com/web/wpcontent/uploads/2015/11/Professional_Development_Learning_from_the_Best-Public_Impact.pdf

Leadership: Great leaders. Great teams. Great results. (2007) Salt Lake City, UT: *FranklinCovey.*

Maxwell, J. C. (2009). *How successful people think*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization.* New York, NY: Crown Business.

APPENDIX A

Skit

Title: Professional Learning Community Begins

Details:

- Two Acts
- Each character's lines are written below; however, make them your own. Speak how you would normally speak; however, please don't change the meaning of the sentence or sentences.

Characters are employees for Measurement Incorporated (MI):
Jason – Wants to organize a PLC to study a trend in education
Shannon – Wants to learn more about PTs, invites others to join
Maud – Not interested in the whole PLC or PT discussion; she is really hungry and ignores most of the conversation
Lisa – Wants to learn more, specifically how PTs are used in math
Ann – Offers comic relief: always late, loves to talk about her grandchildren, brings snacks to meetings
Andy – Wants to learn more, specifically how PTs are used in science
Michael G – Is invited to participate in focus group; shows up for Act 2
Erin - Is invited to participate in focus group; shows up for Act 2

Props for Act One:
Lunch table with 5 chairs
5 water bottles
5 lunches
Magazine or book for Maud

Props for Act Two:
Lunch table with 7 chairs
Research articles
Pencils, notebooks
Snacks

Act One

MI conference room – after a division meeting

(Lights fade in on Jason, Andy, Shannon, Maud, and Lisa having lunch. Ann walks in and Lisa invites her to sit with the group. Andy grabs a chair for Ann, and Ann sits with the group.)

ANN: (*Speaking to the whole group*) How was everyone's weekend?
(Everyone makes small comments.)

ANN: I had a wonderful weekend with my grandkids . . . (*Talks about doing something with* her *family and begins to show pictures to Maud from her cell phone.*)

JASON: You know. . . I like what was presented at the meeting this morning – especially the idea of a Professional Learning Community.

SHANNON: Me, too. But I'm just not sure of how the process works.

MAUD: Who has time for a PVC or PDA, or whatever that thing is called?!

(Brief silences as all take a bite of food.)

LISA: Maud has a point . . . right now in math, we are slammed! We are working on 3 major projects. But I am interested in learning more about Performance Tasks. We designed a few for a client last fall but there are so many different kinds of PTs. I'd like to dig into PTs a little deeper. Is this a current trend or is it just something that client wanted?

ANDY: I've been wondering the same thing. I've also been wondering how a Performance Task is different from the Next Generation Science Standard items.

JASON: So, do you want to create a focus group and study Performance Tasks?

(All but Maud nod their heads and make various comments: sure, great idea, etc.)

MAUD: I don't have time to be in a focus group. Ann or Lisa can just let me know what you find out.

ANN: Sure thing, Maud. I'd love to be a part of this focus group. Who else is in?

(All but Maud say that they are in!)

LISA: So, what's next?

SHANNON: Where do we go from here? Can I invite a few other folks?

ANDY: I guess I'll need to talk with Kathryn Bunch about this. I need to make sure it's okay with her that I participate.

JASON: Well, it just so happens that I printed off the form the PD facilitator was talking about this morning, and I brought it with me. As I understand the process it goes something like this: (*makes a gesture to emphasize bold letters, such as air quotes)*

- First, we put together a **f**ocus group. That's us, plus whoever we'd like to invite.
- Then, we choose the **f**ocus topic: Performance Tasks
- Next, the facilitator of the **f**ocus group fills out the form. The directions are at the top of the form. And as Andy pointed out, the participants communicate with immediate supervisor about participating.
- The, the **f**un begins; we decide who researches AND when and where we want to meet; at the meeting each person shares findings.

LISA: I get it! The 4 F's! *(laughs*) Since Jason brought it up, he can facilitate and fill out the form. I'll do some research on what's currently being used in education and gather info from the math perspective.

ANN: I'll piggy back on what Lisa is finding out and see what I can find focusing on what's happening in specific grade levels: elementary, middle, and high school. I'll bring some snacks, too.

SHANNON: Hey, I can invite Michael and one of the ELA content specialists to join us. Maybe I'll look at examples from other projects.

(All but Maud nod their heads and make various comments: sure, great idea, etc. Maud continues munching on her food and looking at a magazine or book.)

ANDY: I'll see what I can find on the relationship between PTs and NGSS.

JASON: There is a conference next week with sessions on Performance Tasks. I will attend a few of those. Okay. Well, Maud, you still out?

MAUD: Yep, count me out.

JASON: So, let's look at our calendars and set a meeting date. 2 weeks?

(All start whispering and making various comments about the date and place of the next meeting. Maud continues munching on her food and looking at a magazine or book.)

Act Two

MI breakroom for the PLC meeting on Performance Tasks – a few weeks later

Jason, Andy, Shannon, Michael, Erin, and Lisa are sitting around a table. Andy is sharing what he has learned. Others are listening, nodding their heads, maybe taking notes. Ann walks in and apologizes for being late. Ann sits with the group and offers snacks.

MICHAEL: (*sarcastically*) Ann, so glad you could make it.

ANN: Oh well, I'm here and I brought snacks.

ANDY: Questions? Comments?

JASON: Who's up next?

SHANNON: Erin and I found these examples. We brought copies to share with you. Erin's going to give you a brief summary of the information. (*Gives papers to all*)

ERIN: (*Erin briefly tells about Integrated Performance Tasks*) Another way to describe a performance task is to say that it is an engaging learning experience. (*Reading from the article*) "Engaging is synonymous with interesting and compelling. Experiences produce personal insights that are deeper and longer than explanations. For students, a rigorous curriculum ought to be both engaging and experiential. It needs to provide them with powerful learning opportunities intentionally designed to motivate, challenge, and support them in making important 'aha's' and connections on their own." (Ainsworth, 2010) Also, PTs should be authentic and real-world issues in which students can offer solutions.

MICHAEL: So, what you are saying is . . . (*restates some of the information that Erin has stated.*) You know the part about being authentic and real-world will engage students immediately. There is so much near the RTP area that content specialists could use when creating integrated PTs. One example is the Carolina Tiger Rescue in Pittsboro, NC.

ANN: I'll take my grandchildren this weekend for a visit. I can bring back what I learn and share it at our next meeting.

JASON: I attended that conference last week and went to several sessions on Performance Tasks. Let me share what I learned. (*Jason shares information from the conference.)*

ANDY: So, what's next for our focus group?

LISA: We could continue our research, create some PTs, or plan how we'd like to share this with other departments in our division. It is up to us. What does the group think?

(All start talking softly - making various comments what to do next.)

MAUD: (*Gets off the elevator and walks towards group, makes a scrawling face*): Good grief!

(*Lights fade.)*