Chapter 9

Professional Learning Communities:
An Inclusive Solution for Engagement and Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Thriving in today's global society means meeting the demands for success by simple provisional steps or internal and organizational paradigm shifts. As organizations command numerous departments, oversee a diverse workforce, and have various agendas and goals, creating and maintaining a culture of collaboration and inclusion is vital but challenging. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a way for colleagues from all areas of an organization to connect. PLCs have been a proven strategy for fostering collaboration, expanding scholarship, and enhancing professional efficacy. The intention of a PLC is to confront a challenge, meet a goal, or implement a change for the good of the organization while also building a sense of community through collaboration. This chapter will emphasize how PLCs contribute to experiential learning, inclusive learning settings, and address common communication challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration and inclusion are essential for an organization to survive in a globalized society. Educational institutions must simultaneously command multiple departments, support a diverse workforce, and meet numerous agendas and goals. To meet this demand, organizations have the unique opportunity to integrate creative strategies, processes, and solutions. These processes can often become segmented as departments aim to reach their respective requirements to achieve departmental objectives and individual employee goals. While all departments may be working in tandem towards the organization's common good, focus on the organizational vision can be problematic with siloed communication channels and a diverse organizational population functioning independently in separate work environments. To encourage a focus on the institution's vision and a feeling of inclusion rather than isolation, organizations can create communities by providing ways to interact — erasing potential departmental barriers. The following chapter presents the varying degrees of involvement for all participants and an overview of strategies for successful implementation, functionality, and efficiency.

One way to establish a sense of inclusion and evade feelings of isolation within an educational setting is to establish a professional learning community (PLC). PLCs are made up of education professionals from across an educational institution and promote a collaborative approach towards shared goals or visions to ensure student learning (DuFour, 2004). Educational institutions have experienced a shift in the 21st century with the rapid advancement and necessity of technology, infrastructure, and the overall speed of information and ideas exchange. Any working professional has likely felt the effects of rapid globalization on many levels and has adopted alternative approaches to collaboration and inclusive working environments (Mumby & Kuhn, 2018). Collaborative relationship building and inclusive learning practices have also been adapted to meet the increasing need for virtual settings and hybrid workspaces. PLCs are a proven strategy for fostering collaboration, erasing departmental boundaries, expanding scholarship, and enhancing professional efficacy in virtual and traditional educational settings (Bettersby & Verdi, 2015). The primary purpose of a PLC is to tackle a challenge, meet a goal, or implement a change for the organization's good while encouraging individual growth. While much of the foundational research and implementation of PLCs was founded in education (notably the K–12 setting), today, PLCs are increasingly being used by major organizations and corporations worldwide to promote and foster a collaborative culture and a focus on learning.

This chapter explores what PLCs are and emphasizes how the inclusion of PLCs contributes to experiential learning, offers varying degrees of involvement, and deepens the efficacy of all participants (Sternberg & Zhang, 2000). An overview and

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