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Building a Professional Learning Community at Work™:

A Guide to the First Year

By Parry Graham and William M. Ferriter

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Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Building a Professional Learning Community at Work: A Guide to the First Year* by Parry Graham and William M. Ferriter. By focusing on the successes and challenges inherent in the process, *Building a Professional Learning Community at Work* is designed to help teachers and administrators accomplish the difficult task of building a professional learning community from the ground up.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers either to work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or teams to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote the creation of a professional learning community.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

Chapter 1

Starting With a Vision

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1. When working toward becoming a professional learning community (PLC), why is it important to take the time to research PLCs and have a clear initial vision of what you want your school to look like? What role does this vision play in developing a PLC?

2. Why is it important to engage in open-ended conversations about the PLC model before initiating the building process, and how do you connect with colleagues who are not as interested? How might the *living systems theory* help encourage collaboration on all levels?

3. Why is it important for colleagues to make decisions—even about hiring new teachers—collaboratively, rather than individually? How might differences in opinion help or hinder progress?

4. What is the importance of the dinosaur story, and why did Steve consistently reuse it?

5. What are the three expectations Steve presented, and why do they need to be accessible to everyone from parents to practitioners?

6. What is the hedgehog concept? How might it be beneficial to your school?

7. What issues do you anticipate, or have you encountered, in your own process of

   beginning a PLC?

Chapter 2

Empowering the Core Team

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1. Why are many teachers uncomfortable with the pledge to *ensure* high student achievement? How does that pledge help promote success, even with the threat of failure? Does the sense of collaboration that comes with a PLC help make the pledge seem more attainable?

2. How does a core group help determine the future shape of an organization? How would you organize your colleagues into a core group based on Steve's list of important skill sets, or on Gladwell's *Connectors*, *Mavens*, *and Salesmen*?

3. Why is communication the lifeblood of a successful PLC? Give some examples of how, in your own experiences, various forms of communication have helped the initial vision of a PLC succeed.

4. Why is trust critical to the success of a PLC? How does trust help distribute the sense of power and authority, keeping everyone accountable?

5. How does the metaphor of a *phase transition* apply to a school implementing a PLC? Describe any instances of such a transition in your own school.

Chapter 3

Creating Trust

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1. Discuss ways school leaders can create a trusting environment where teachers and administrators share in decision making. When participants' voices are heard and valued, regardless of seniority, how does the dynamic of a group change?

2. How should an administrator facilitate decision making so that everyone works toward common goals?

3. Why is it important to move beyond being amiable and push to deepen professional conversations and relationships built on shared experiences? How have your school leaders modeled reflection, collegial relationships, and professional dialogue?

4. Why is it important to set up guidelines for collaboration between colleagues? Describe a situation where collaboration did not help, and then explain how it could have been different if clear expectations had been laid out.

5. Which forms of communication among colleagues has your school used? Describe how each worked or didn't work. What new types of communication would you like to try?

6. How can you or your school rearrange the schedule in order to allow extra time for

    collaboration and discussion?

Chapter 4

Supporting Team Development

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1. Describe a situation like Tom's, where you or a coworker had the best of intentions, but the lack of communication blocked any progress toward becoming a true PLC. How did you resolve the situation, and would you have handled things differently given a second opportunity?

2. Why is it important for all parties involved to understand team development and recognize where the group is on the developmental continuum? How can a common language help keep participants on the same page?

3. Which of Tuckman's four stages (*forming, storming, norming,* and *performing*) describes where you see your group currently, and why?

4. How can establishing clear parameters and priorities help teams circumvent the struggles of filling (and overfilling) group meetings?

5. Has your team defined what students should learn and what student mastery looks like? Describe the struggles and successes of implementing a common assessment.

6. Receiving the results of a common assessment can be overwhelming emotionally. What steps in your school are designed to improve teacher performance via support and frequent, informed conversation? What steps would you like to see in place that would help avoid feelings of inadequacy, failure, and defensiveness?

7. Are teachers in your school—both as teams and as individuals—encouraged to have professional ownership over their instructional practices? In what ways have you and your colleagues been challenged by proactive questions?

8. Which instructional practices has your team decided are the most effective for your students? How did you come to that decision?

Chapter 5

Negotiating Personalities and Conflict

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1. When has your team turned a hostile confrontation built up over time into a productive conversation, and how did you work together to figure out what the real issue was?

2. How can you build the understanding of and respect for different perspectives into the structure of the team and the meeting?

3. How can using an agenda, recording minutes, and assigning clear roles in meetings help dispel tension? What is the *fist-to-five* method of decision making, and how can it create a level ground for all team members?

4. How do you know when an administrator should or shouldn't handle a conflict within a team? How should the administrator deal with the conflict if there is a need for action?

5. What are Lencioni's five dysfunctions? Give examples of how you have dealt with these dysfunctions within a team setting, as well as how you would like to deal with them if they arise again.

Chapter 6
Experiencing Frustration

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1. What are the differences between a loosely coupled environment and an interdependent one? What kinds of roadblocks can you expect if moving from a loosely coupled environment into interdependence?

2. A key challenge in building a PLC is the systematic tightening that must occur. Which of Steve's five strategies have you used, which would you like to try, and why?

3. The authors describe three general categories of frustrations related to developing a PLC. What are these three categories? Describe any experiences with frustrations in these categories, as well as how the frustrations were resolved.

4. When a school is not used to collaborating via technology, what challenges might arise? Describe how Shirky's three levels of collaborative technology might help ease a school into more efficient work.

Chapter 7

Connecting Data Analysis and Instructional Improvement

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1. Why is collecting and assessing collaborative data so difficult? How can a focus on student learning rather than teacher success shift the understanding of the data analysis?

2. List the data analysis strategies and discussion strategies that you think would work well in your school, and explain how they could improve the current methods in place.

3. What does it mean to build shared understanding, and why is it important?

4. Describe the *everything-goes brainstorming* and *final word* techniques, and explain how they might help your team work toward developing shared understanding.

5. What effect can overreliance on structures set up at the beginning of the development process have on a team?

6. Define *positive deviants* and explain how the term relates to improving understanding of student data analysis.

Chapter 8

Building a Collective Intelligence

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1. Why is it incorrect to say that "ah-ha!" moments come in a flash of inspiration? How does this idea relate to the progression of a PLC?

2. Explain *deep listening* and give examples of the differences it has made or might make within your team.

3. What makes lesson study such a valuable strategy? How might you incorporate it into your own team practices?

4. What is the basic process of action research, and how does it differ from traditional research?

5. How do the authors define *intervention*? How might your school or team use the various types of intervention?

6. What are Surowiecki's three conditions for a group to make intelligent decisions? Have you achieved these conditions within your own team?