

Reflection on Professional Learning Communities

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Context

My current job title is Manager of Applications Support at the Santa Clara County Office of Education. Applications Support serves districts within Santa Clara and San Benito counties and consists of 7 System Analysts and one Technology Trainer; total 8 full time equivalents. This group is within the Technology Service Branch under the direction of Craig Blackburn, Director of Technology Programs and Instructional Support. The Web Development group and the Educational Technology Group also report to Craig as part of Technology Programs and Instructional Support. The technology we, the Application Support team, manage for our customers are business related systems.

Artifacts

Artifact one is an excerpt from an online discussion group about an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system where individuals from districts and counties participate in dialogue about the system and support issues. I admit in my reply to this discussion group that we at SCCOE don't know either, (de-privatization), and suggest we discuss ideas as a group at an upcoming meeting.

Artifact two is a page from the upcoming Quintessential School Systems (the ERP mentioned in artifact 1) User Group conference where I will lead a round table discussion on the current state of Human Resource Information Systems and promote sharing of information and ideas. This is an example of continuous inquiry, and collaboration and also de-privatization.

Artifact 3 is an example of my team meeting agenda which includes SWAT discussion, strengths, weaknesses, achievements/opportunities and threats. Our current book is Success Built to Last as a round table and focus on improving our process as a group. This is an example of leading continuous inquiry, and collaboration.

Artifact Summary

My first two artifacts are examples of participating in discussions, offering ideas and posing questions and reflect collaboration and/or de-privatizing practice. Artifact 3 is an example of creating a professional learning community in the group which I manage. Encouraging my direct reports to participate in in reflective dialogue, continuous inquiry, and collaboration and/or de-privatizing practice.

Reflection

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) has been on my horizon for some time, however I did not see it as true reality within my daily work. For the most part PLCs were something in which the certificated staff participated. The article that we read in class by DuFour encourages that we pay attention to the big ideas:

Ensuring that students learn

Culture of Collaboration

Focus on Results

Many people from the group I manage at SCCOE have previously worked in the private sector. De-privatizing is an uncomfortable concept from that point of view. In the private sector, even fellow employees are often seen as competitors; any weaknesses are cleansed and spun - if they are ever acknowledged. Projects in the private sector are often subjected to autopsies or post mortems. Post mortems has quite a negative connotation. During the post mortem the presenter is required to provide lessons learned while knowing that the outcome of the project will be part of their performance review. These traditional methods were summative and seem to be the antithesis of a PLC which seems to be more formative.

The group I manage, Applications Support, has been on a 5 year journey after a Technology Branch was formed at SCCOE. Working with my Director, Craig Blackburn, the group dynamics have changed significantly. The answer to most problems was to collaborate more, and more.

After the branch was formed my work group began reading books because I emulated what my leadership was doing. Last year as the technology management team was reading and discussing the book Rapid Retooling, the group I lead was reading the book Fish!. We discussed ways to improve our customer service based on ideas from the book Fish!. One of the books we read was The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. A key point from that book was to not avoid conflict. When we started arguing (politely) and openly we got more done. Main concepts of a PLC, de-privatizing practice, continuous inquiry and collaboration align with the Lencioni's five dysfunctions of a team; absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results. I also found a parallel with the concepts of a PLC and The Speed of Trust by Covey. This book was also a study book at SCCOE and mentioned in our CTO mentor class. Being able to successfully collaborate requires relationship trust. Building this trust within a PLC allows open exchange of ideas and improves the speed of positive change.

As I contemplated the definition and goal of a PLC I realized that I actively participate in several PLC at SCCOE; they have not been labeled PLCs. Our leadership did not announce we were

going to form a PLC, they led by example. The manager's group meetings could be considered a PLC, my team could be considered a PLC and even my local ACSA group acts as a PLC.

Impact

The CTO Mentor program has helped me understand the exact definition and intention of a PLC and helped solidify my understanding of the interplay of concepts that we have been working on within our branch. I believe I am better prepared to lead my group and use a PLC as a tool after participating in this assignment with the CTO Mentor Program. I will be better able to participate within communities and lead my team to intentionally use reflective dialogue, continuous inquiry, collaboration and/or de-privatizing practice to improve our services and serve our districts.

Covey, S. M.R. (2006). *The Speed of Trust*. New York, NY: Simon & Shuster.

DuFour, R. (2004). *What Is a Professional Learning Community?*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may04/vol61/num08/What-Is-a-Professional-Learning-Community%C2%A2.aspx>

Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.