

Connoisseurs of Interactive Tools and Strategies: How Teams Use Process to Achieve Results

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“The process of becoming a PLC is designed to achieve a very specific purpose: to continuously improve the collective capacity of a group to achieve intended results. Therefore, it is incongruous to engage in elements of the process and ignore results.”

—Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Tom Many, and Mike Mattos

We couldn't agree more with Richard DuFour and his colleagues (2006, 2016); any process that teams engage in should be purposeful and lead to results. We do not support arbitrary process or random activities; process for the sake of process only creates resentment on a team. Instead, we recommend teachers be intentional and use process to improve the productivity of their teams.

The right kinds of processes—ones that engage team members in a collective effort to improve their practice—greatly increase the likelihood that teams will reach their goals. The best teams are results oriented, but those teams are also mindful that without a solid grasp of how to use process effectively, they will struggle to achieve the kind of results they seek. Simply put, the key to achieving results is effective process.

“One of the key skills or attributes of a quality principal is expertise in group process.”

—John Gooden, Garth Petrie, Patricia Lindauer, and Michael Richardson

Ensuring teams use process to achieve their goals is the responsibility of principals and teacher leaders alike; schools can encourage more effective process in three important ways.

First, teachers benefit from training on how to use process effectively. If leaders expect teams to use process well, it just makes sense to show them how and develop their capacity to match the right process with the right task. Second, as part of teacher evaluation and performance appraisal, principals should ask individual teachers to assess the impact of their team's process on improving teaching and learning and identify ways they personally contribute to making that process more effective. Finally, the only way teachers will know leaders value that process is for leaders to confront individuals who do not meaningfully engage in process and hold them accountable for their actions.

“Process must match intended outcomes and help you accomplish your goals. Be deliberate and focused on results when determining what process will work best for you.”

—Susan K. Sparks

There are a variety of interactive tools and strategies teams use to strengthen process on collaborative teams. Most fall under the headings of rituals and routines, interactive tools, interactive activities, or protocols. The key is to match the choice with the task at hand.

Rituals and Routines

Teams use rituals and routines to highlight what is important, celebrate what the school values, and provide the encouragement necessary to continue improving. Rituals and routines are also terrific ways to enhance communication and create greater comfort and predictability on teams.

Beginning each meeting with a quick check-in is an example of using rituals and routines effectively. *Check-ins* can be something as simple as answering a question the team leader poses or an activity like WHIP (without hesitation invite participation). WHIP is a simple, easy-to-use interactive strategy where the team leader goes from one person to the next asking each in rapid succession to share a word, phrase, thought, or question related to the day's topic. There is no judgment, and no comments or questions are allowed about what is shared.

Teams can also use rituals and routines to honor and celebrate success. Team members often begin meetings with a statement like, "I would like to recognize one of my teammates," followed by two or three sentences specifically describing the colleague's good work or extra effort. Using rituals and routines in this way recognizes the importance of celebration.

Another ritual and routine teams find useful is to close each meeting with a quick summary of the work or an answer to the question "What are our next steps?" When used regularly, this technique signals the end of the meeting and reminds everyone what the leader expects of them.

Interactive Tools

Teams use a variety of tools such as planning templates, data-gathering forms, and graphic organizers to augment their process. For example, each chapter of *Learning by Doing* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016) includes a continuum describing the development of important PLC concepts. Teams use tools like these continuums and the planning templates that follow to explore their current reality and identify what next steps the team will take to improve.

When teams have limited time and resources, they often rely on a simple form to collect data. Using a single, standardized form to gather everyone's data in one central place makes teams more efficient and moves teachers from looking at "data from *my* students" to looking at "data from *our* students."

Finally, graphic organizers increase understanding, maximize organization, and promote professional learning. Graphic organizers are great tools to link content and show the relationship of past, present, and future work. For example, write agendas as graphic organizers to help lead teams through their meetings.

Interactive Activities

Interactive activities promote everyone's involvement. Use them to gather information, define and clarify problems, generate ideas and possibilities, categorize and narrow options, or prioritize and evaluate alternatives.

Examples of interactive strategies range from something as simple as *Turn to a Partner* to more sophisticated strategies like a *Criteria Matrix* in which teams identify specific criteria or important characteristics, list all the possibilities, and rate each possibility against each criterion. More than anything, interactive activities promote engagement.

Protocols

Protocols are the most powerful interactive strategy teams use to improve their practice. A *protocol* is a set of agreed-on guidelines for a conversation about teaching and learning. Lois Brown Easton (2009) identifies four major categories of protocols, and while they share some similarities, protocols in each category serve a different purpose. The four categories include

(1) protocols for looking at professional reading, (2) protocols for looking at issues and concerns, (3) protocols for looking at student work, and (4) protocols for looking at professional practice.

“Process is a method of conducting meetings and engaging participants. It is a series of actions that move teams closer to their goals.”

—Susan Sparks

We believe collaborative teams are most effective when they balance effective process and a strong results orientation. Furthermore, we argue teams must be intentional with process. Team members should consider themselves connoisseurs who collect a variety of interactive tools and strategies and use them to accomplish their goals. Regardless of which they choose, the purpose of process is to engage teams in a cycle of continuous improvement to achieve results.

References

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