

**Partners in Learning
Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity
Leadership for Change Library**

Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work
Richard Dufour, Rebecca Dufour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many
Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2006
204 pages

The only book on *professional learning communities* (PLCs) on our list, and a gem consistent with our theme of leading with action and doing.

PLCs have six interrelated characteristics:

1. A focus on learning
2. A collaborative culture
3. Collective inquiry
4. An action orientation
5. A commitment to continuous improvement
6. Results orientation

Dufour, et al., make no bones about it: schools that take the plunge and actually begin “doing” the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years preparing to become PLCs through reading or even training.

What makes this handbook distinctive is that it proceeds to illustrate how to develop PLCs incorporating the six key characteristics. The authors anticipate and answer what they call the “Yea, but ...” questions:

“Yea, but ... How are we supposed to find time to collaborate?”

“Yea, but ... How can this work in a school this big (or small, or poor, or urban, or rural, or suburban, or low-achieving, or high-achieving)?”

“Yea, but ... How can we make this happen with our ineffective principal, unsupportive central office, or adversarial union?”

Dufour, et al., provide a framework for assessing where you are on the PLC journey: pre-initiation stage, initiation stage, developing stage, or sustaining stage.

The handbook contains several “tips for moving forward” geared to each of the characteristics.

Throughout the book the authors consistently present the combination of “here’s what,” “here’s why” and “here’s how” of PLCs in action. Each chapter contains a case study or vignette linked to the theme being discussed, so every major point is grounded in reality.

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The chapter on Results Orientation is an excellent case in point to illustrate the tips. Suggestions: use feedback on results to inform, not punishment; provide the basis of comparison that translates data into information; use apples to apples comparisons; teachers and principals must engage in data analysis rather than outsourcing the task to others; and a fixation with results does not mean an inattention to people.

Finally, the book is realistic in surfacing the problem that some staff may not support PLCs and what to do in the face of resistance. The authors, rightly, conclude (a) PLCs are powerfully effective, and (b) they are equally complex to create.

Why We Like This Book

It is dead on central to the core of improvement in schools. It lays out the key agenda in key terms. It pushes the “how to do it” challenge to the limit without providing an unrealistic blueprint. This is a book that shows what we need to do to achieve much needed PLCs on a large scale. It provides all the guidelines and tips we need to accomplish PLCs and their accompanying results. And, it is a book that still says, in the end, “It’s going to be hard — hard, but worth it.”



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