FOREWORD

My colleague, Bob Eaker, and I have devoted a good deal of our professional lives in recent years to persuading educators that building the results-oriented, collaborative culture of a professional learning community offers the best hope for transforming schools and energizing the adults within them. One of the activities we have used on occasion to make the case for a learning community presents a scenario describing the experience of two teachers entering the profession in two different schools.

A Tale of Two Teachers

The first teacher, Beth, is assigned to teach the most difficult remedial classes in the school. Her orientation takes place on the morning before school starts, and is directed by her principal. It consists of a brief review of the faculty manual, distribution of her class list, and presentation of her keys. Most of the session deals with an explanation of how to handle specific issues, with an admonition from the principal that the new teachers must learn how to manage their own classrooms and refrain from sending their problems to the office to be solved. She struggles mightily to solve the myriad of problems that she faces as she confronts 135 apathetic students each day, and then spends three days each week and every weekend supervising the cheerleaders – one of the prerequisites for taking her job. Thrust into this sink-or-swim environment, Beth sinks, and another caring individual is lost to the teaching profession – forever.

The second teacher, Connie, has a much different experience. She is assigned a trained mentor who contacts her before the school year starts to see what questions she has about her assignment, launching a relationship that will last at least two years. Her mentor, Jim, is there every step of the way. The new teachers arrive at school a full week before the students, and Jim assists with her orientation to the school. The entire school is organized into collaborative teams based on teaching assignments, and she and Jim are assigned to the same team. He facilitates her transition onto the team and provides her with course outlines, pacing guides, rubrics, team files, common assessments, and analysis of student performance in their course for the preceding three years. He introduces her to the school's teacher evaluation system. He conducts pre-observation conferences, observes her at work in the classroom, and helps her to analyze and assess her performance based on the notes that he generated. He explains that peer coaching is valued in the school, and he asks her to observe him in the classroom and to give him feedback on some of the strategies he is using.

Jim helps Connie become familiar with the many support systems that are available to students and teachers and offers her advice as to how she can use those systems. He periodically asks her questions about her thought process in teaching the course. What does she hope students will know and be able to do as a result of today's lesson? Are prerequisite skills required to master this lesson? Do the students have those skills? How does she know? What instructional strategies will she use? How and when will she check for understanding? How will she know when students have mastered the material? What criteria will she use in judging the quality of student work? How will she respond if a student fails to accomplish the intended outcomes of the lesson or of the unit? In short, he asks her questions that help her become a reflective practitioner.

Jim was not the only person helping Connie. She had the benefit of weekly meetings, during the school day, with all the members of her course team. The entire department meets monthly. She also attended a monthly meeting of all new teachers conducted by the principal and veteran teachers. Each meeting had a theme, a reading assignment, and a required journal entry. As participants shared this experience and their thoughts over the two years of the program, they developed a kinship and provided one another with another source of ideas and comfort.

Connie also had opportunities to explore topics with colleagues through a monthly Lunch and Learn program that brought teachers together to investigate a common concern or interest. She had opportunities to earn credit on the salary schedule by enrolling in courses taught on her own campus by colleagues after school and during the summer. She participated in her team's action research project and common staff development initiative. Jim taught her how to analyze data on the performance of her students and how to identify areas where she needed help from her teammates in raising that performance. She participated in team review of model lessons taught by a member of the team and then analyzed and discussed as a group.

In a short period of time, Connie was able to identify and embrace the attitudes, expectations, beliefs, and habits that made up the unique culture of her school. She learned that, in this school, being a contributing member of a collaborative team was not optional. She learned that inquiry and reflection were part of the routine fabric of the school. She learned of the school's unrelenting focus on student learning and the tenacity with which it pursued such critical questions as, "If we truly believe all kids can learn, then what do we want them to learn, how will we know when they have learned it, and how will we respond when they don't?"

Participant Reaction

At the end of the review of this scenario, members of the audience are asked to work together in small groups to answer the following questions:

1. Was your own introduction to the profession closer to Beth's experience or Connie's experience?
2. Is it desirable to provide new teachers with a system of support similar to Connie's experience?
3. Is it feasible for schools to offer this level of support to new teachers?

The responses to these questions have been remarkably similar over the years – regardless of the grade level of the school, the age of the respondents, or where in North America I raise the question. Virtually all educators indicate that:

1. Their introduction to the profession resembled the sink-or-swim approach described in Beth's scenario. Many teachers seem to revel in the adversity and obstacles they had to overcome on their own as they began their careers.
2. It would indeed be wonderful if every teacher could have the benefit of the support and nurturing described in Connie's scenario.
3. It is not feasible that schools will offer such support any time in the near future.

At first, I was profoundly discouraged by this response. It seemed that teachers were saying, "Yes, it was hell entering this profession, and yes, it would be extremely beneficial if every new staff member had a support system as they entered the profession or became a member of a new faculty. It is unlikely, however, that schools will ever provide that support system." Even when participants were presented with examples of real schools doing everything described in Connie's scenario, participants tended to remain pessimistic about the possibility of this support becoming the rule for new staff rather than the exception.

When I probed to discover the nature of this pessimism, I found that the multiple elements of the collaborative and nurturing culture described in the scenario seemed to overwhelm the workshop participants. The specific, small, incremental steps necessary to create such a culture were obscured by the immense difference between the culture of a traditional school and the culture of a professional learning community.

My observation is that virtually no one disputes the pressing need for more effective mentoring, particularly as North America confronts a looming teacher shortage. Many states have mandated that every new teacher have the benefit of a mentor. Educators don't need to be convinced either of the dire need for or the benefits of effective mentoring; however, they would benefit from specific, practical steps regarding how they could create such programs in their schools.

This much-needed book on mentoring represents a tremendous contribution to the literature on professional learning communities, because it presents the component parts of an effective mentoring program and provides very explicit, step-by-step guidelines to build such a program in the real world of schools. The authors demonstrate great empathy for teachers and administrators who confront the challenges facing public schools. They understand the ebb and flow of a school year, and they respect the demands placed upon contemporary educators. They set out to offer ideas that are relevant and realistic – and they succeed. I also appreciate this book because it addresses the entire culture of the school, rather than limiting itself to the narrow focus of the experience of new staff. Many schools have approached mentoring as independent activity, divorced from the rest of the life of the school. They seem to forget that if a good person is placed in a bad culture, the culture will typically win. The authors understand that an effective mentoring program can reinforce the conditions that foster learning communities, but they also understand that monitoring represents just one part of the whole that comprises a learning community. The themes that resonate through their book – collaboration, reflective practice, shared vision for ongoing, job-embedded professional development, and a constant focus on student learning – must come to typify the entire school, not just the mentoring program. If new staff do not see these conditions as characteristic of their school, if they do not come to understand that these characteristics are valued in their school, they will be unlikely to embrace those characteristics, no matter how much they are encouraged in that direction by a mentor.

Thus, I recommend this book to you, not only because of the very specific tools it provides in building an effective mentoring program, but also because the authors demonstrate a deep understanding and appreciation of the fact that the qualities they call for in a model mentoring program must become the qualities that characterize the entire school. Their ideas, if put into practice, will benefit not only the newest members of a staff, but also all educators who hope to enhance their professional competence through the power of a professional learning community.

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