As professional learning communities become more widespread, educators have learned that they can’t simply form grade-level or subject-area teams and call it a day. To profoundly affect teacher practice and student learning, PLCs need strong and knowledgeable leadership.

In Facilitating Teacher Teams and Authentic PLCs, Daniel R. Venables draws on his extensive experience helping schools and districts implement effective PLCs to explore this crucial but often-overlooked need. Taking a two-pronged approach to PLC facilitation, Venables offers targeted guidance both for leading the people in teacher teams and for facilitating their work. This practical resource provides

• Strategies for facilitating interactions among colleagues in PLCs and building trust and buy-in.
• Field-tested, user-friendly protocols to focus and deepen team discussions around texts, data, teacher and student work, teacher dilemmas, and collaborative planning time.
• Tips for anticipating and addressing interpersonal conflicts and obstacles that commonly arise during use of protocols.

Current and prospective PLC facilitators at every grade level will find this book an essential guide to navigating the challenging and rewarding endeavor of leading authentic PLCs. Build your skills, and help your team rise to the next level.
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INTRODUCTION

Like my previous two books (The Practice of Authentic PLCs and How Teachers Can Turn Data into Action), this book was born of need. In my work helping dozens of schools and districts to implement authentic PLCs, I learned that it wasn’t enough to educate teacher teams about what authentic PLCs are, what they do, and how they do it. That information was essential, to be sure, but without strong and knowledgeable leadership, these PLCs would have at best a marginal influence on student learning.

Accordingly, in early 2010, I started the Center for Authentic PLCs, through which I began offering professional development to schools and districts training teachers to be effective facilitators of PLCs. These trainings would eventually become the Grapple Institutes (see www.authenticplcs.com for more information).

Although nothing beats in-person training for learning about something as complex as facilitating PLCs, this book emerged as a kind of handbook for leading authentic PLCs, intended both for teachers who have been through the training and for those who have not. These pages address just about every topic related to facilitating PLCs that the Grapple Institutes cover.

It’s Not About You

Facilitating teacher colleagues in doing the important work of authentic PLCs has been and continues to be one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavors I have pursued in my 30-plus years in education. For me, a major turning point in becoming a skilled facilitator was realizing that my effectiveness was directly dependent on my awareness of where my team members were—individually and collectively—in their understanding of and engagement with the work. In other words, my own understanding and readiness to embrace a new idea or protocol matter less than their level of understanding and readiness. I realized that for PLCs to rise to the next level, facilitators need to be in tune with where their teachers are and contribute just the right thing to move them forward.

Good instructors in any field—yoga, piano, football, you name it—take their students to the next level; great instructors take their students to the next level without skipping any. To be able to do so, they must be continually aware of students’ present
understanding as well as their readiness for the next thing. Such is also true of PLC facilitators.

Developing this finely tuned awareness and acting on it accordingly may seem to be a daunting task, but with the aid of this book and some practice, it will become second nature. In the meantime, ask yourself, “What do my team members need right now to move forward in their knowledge, understanding, and readiness?” It’s not terribly different from what master teachers ask themselves during classroom instruction.

What’s in This Book

Facilitating Teacher Teams and Authentic PLCs is divided into two parts: “Facilitating Teachers and Teacher Teams” and “Facilitating Tasks of Authentic PLCs.” In Part 1, I discuss the human side of facilitating PLCs—that is, facilitating the people in them—and provide the skill set necessary to do it effectively. In Part 2, I offer targeted guidance in facilitating specific protocols and activities typically used in PLC work. Because each protocol has its own nuances and potential pitfalls, I designed Part 2 as a “preemptive strike” to help facilitators anticipate and address the obstacles and jams that commonly pop up during use of the protocols. Part 2 also provides tips for making each protocol the richest possible experience for the teacher team. To enhance facilitation, many of the tools and protocols described throughout this book appear in full in the Appendix. In addition, you can access some of these resources at http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Venables2017forms.pdf.

There are many ideas in this book that require no direct action; they are there to inform the reader and raise awareness of the salient aspects of navigating the interpersonal waters of leading a team of teachers. In other cases, reading is informative but insufficient; some things need to be practiced with teachers in a real live PLC. There is a third type of information in the book that may not require direct practice but can best be understood and internalized through discussion with other teacher leaders. As you will see in Chapter 3, I refer to this practice as constructing community knowledge.

The Vignettes

Throughout this book, you will find short vignettes that offer additional clarity and insight into the nuances of facilitation. Each “Fly on the Wall” section includes a narrative describing a scene from a fictional PLC’s meeting, with footnotes providing brief analyses of particular points of interest. I suggest that when you are reading the text with colleagues (for example, in a book study), you first read the scene
without looking at the footnotes. Then discuss why you think various parts of the vignette have been highlighted for analysis. After this discussion, read the footnotes and see where your thinking and understanding align with my own.

**Venablisms**

First of all, this is not my term; that would be really haughty. This appellation was coined by several participants at a Grapple Institute who observed that I uttered certain truisms over and over again in an effort to highlight any area where they applied. A broken record, me. The Grapple participants compiled a list and called them “Venablisms.” I include them in this book not because I was flattered (although I was), but because they are *that* important. Each of these tenets is of paramount importance and gets at the heart of leading teams. (The only one the Grapple participants missed—no doubt because I say it in jest—happens to apply to the rest of the list: *Bumper stickers and T-shirts should be issued.*)

**A Note on Terms and Titles**

Although the terms PLC and teacher team are not synonymous—it is possible for a school to have teacher teams that would not, by my definition, constitute PLCs—I nonetheless use the words interchangeably for simplicity and clarity. In a similar way, I use the titles leader, facilitator, and coach interchangeably to refer to those who lead PLCs in their schools.

**There Is Learning in the Balance**

Lest we forget, as we spend untold hours working with adults, that it is the students who are the primary benefactors of our labor, here’s a reminder: this work is about kids. Teachers in a PLC have the right and responsibility to throw the *What does this have to do with student learning?* flag whenever our discussions veer off track.

Indeed, in all of our work together, we must constantly remind ourselves and one another that *there is learning in the balance.* The quality of the decisions we make and the swiftness with which we make them greatly affect the education of our students. Time is ticking away for *these* students in *our* charge this year as we wait for 100 percent buy-in, or postpone a sensible initiative until next year, or avoid having hard conversations with an ineffective teacher, or make choices that are convenient for us rather than right for the learning of our children.

This truth provides the beacon that lights our way as we make our decisions and prioritize our focus, and it provides the strength we need when we’re having the hard conversations with one another. When we truly put students at the forefront, difficult decisions become surprisingly easy to make.
VENABLISMS: NON-SLOGANS OF FACILITATING AUTHENTIC PLCS*

The epithet “Venablisms” was coined by a group of teachers attending my Grapple Institute to refer to certain things I say repeatedly throughout the three-day training. Collectively, the “non-slogans” that follow form the heart of authentic facilitation.

- Trust the process.
- This is about kids.
- Build the team before you need it.
- There is learning in the balance.
- Brave the skinny branches.
- Separate the work from the person.
- Facilitators share last.
- Do ask, don’t tell.
- Candor with care.
- Challenges precede growth.
- It’s not about where you are.
- Trust your instincts.
- At the heart of it, PLCs are a human endeavor.
- Substance with safety.
- Do what you say you’re going to do.
- Lead the team for the team.
- Strengthen the team at every opportunity.
- Make the meeting meaningful.
- Elevate, don’t evaluate (the work).

* Each Venablisim represents a core edict in facilitating authentic PLCs developed by Daniel R. Venables. Each is printed in boldface and italics wherever it appears in the text of this book, and each is the subject of a short video in a series titled From the Human Side (of Facilitating PLCs). These videos can be accessed at http://www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Overview/Facilitating-Teacher-Teams-and-Authentic-PLCs.aspx or www.authenticplcs.com.
Part 1:
The Human Side of Facilitating Teachers and Teacher Teams

When it comes down to it, facilitating our fellow teachers is an essentially human endeavor. In most cases, teachers who have been asked (or who have volunteered) to facilitate their teacher teams are colleagues, not administrators. Because they occupy the same position on the totem pole as the rest of the teachers in the PLC and have no special supervisory powers, their effectiveness as facilitators depends significantly on their relationships with their fellow team members. In fact, their leadership in the team is based on these relationships; they have no leverage other than this. Thus, the health of these relationships is paramount. Part 1 of this book accordingly addresses the essentials of facilitating colleagues, building trust and buy-in, and dealing with interpersonal obstacles.
Human and Social Capital

Schools used to pour all of their professional development dollars into building their human capital—that is, improving the quality, knowledge, and skill sets of individual teachers. The rationale was that teachers who attended conferences or participated in other professional development opportunities would return to their schools brimming with knowledge and pass their learning on to their colleagues. In many cases, however, this simply didn’t happen, so the funds invested in sending a single teacher to a conference yielded relatively small returns—which led to little improvement in classroom instruction on any scale.

Today, thanks in large part to the research of Dr. Carrie Leana of the University of Pittsburgh and others, we are learning that building social capital is a more effective professional development strategy. In contrast to human capital, social capital refers to the quality of the interactions among teachers in a department or school. Schools with high social capital show significantly higher gains in student learning than do schools with low social capital—even when those schools have moderately low human capital. Leana writes,

> When the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction—that is, when social capital is strong—student achievement scores improve. . . . We also found that even low-ability teachers can perform as well as teachers of average ability if they have strong social capital. Strong social capital can go a long way toward offsetting any disadvantages students face when their teachers have low human capital. (2011, pp. 33, 34)

This is not to say that schools should never bother improving their human capital; incorporating both forms of teacher professional development is ideal (Figure 1.1 offers examples of actions that promote both types of capital). If schools want to get the most bang for their professional development buck, however, they should invest heavily in developing the social capital of their teachers and teacher teams. A great
way to spike the social capital of a school is to focus priority on the school’s PLCs. If the quality of teacher interactions in a school’s PLCs improves, there is likely to be a commensurate gain in student learning.

**Why Are PLC Facilitators Indispensable?**

Although PLCs are an effective way to build social capital, not all PLCs are created equal. More specifically, ensuring effective *facilitation* of PLCs is key; simply assembling teams and sending them on their way is inadequate. As someone who works with schools throughout the United States developing authentic PLCs and training facilitators, I firmly believe that every PLC should have a person designated as the facilitator.

There are PLC models available that don’t call for a facilitator. The thinking behind such models is that “we’re all in this together,” and their structure is based on a model of shared leadership. In theory, a teacher team that is able to facilitate itself sounds great, but I have rarely seen this model work in practice. Usually, shared
leadership in this context means no leadership at all. Discussions veer off track, time is wasted, and the focus shifts from teaching and learning to matters only tangentially, if at all, related to student learning. As a result, the growth of such a team is very slow, and anything meaningful the team achieves could have been accomplished by a facilitator-led PLC in half the time. Slow progress and a lack of focus aren’t the only drawbacks of this model; more serious is what happens when interpersonal conflicts or other obstacles arise and there’s no well-trained facilitator to guide the group to a resolution.

**The Role of the Facilitator**

A PLC facilitator’s primary role is to increase and maintain the social capital in his or her teacher team. If team members are engaging in quality interactions focused on teaching and learning, then their students’ achievement will improve. This job comes with many other responsibilities, including:

- Guiding the team through the steps of protocols.
- Asking thought-provoking questions that challenge conventional thinking and push the discussion to a deeper level.
- Promoting and modeling honesty and respect in discussions.
- Ensuring that all voices are heard.
- Maintaining team members’ emotional safety during discussions.
- Keeping the team focused and moving it forward when it’s stuck.
- Mediating disagreements and helping the team navigate the sometimes-turbulent waters of interpersonal dynamics.
- Being able to step back, particularly when being emotionally drawn into a problematic group dynamic.
- Working for the good of the team.

The last bullet point touches on one of the most important responsibilities of a PLC facilitator. In 1985, when dozens of the biggest names in music came together to record the charity single “We Are the World,” a sign posted outside the studio admonished the artists to “Please check your egos at the door.” This sign served to remind participants that the goal of the project was to help others—not to boost egos or careers. Similarly, the Code of Ethics I share in *The Practice of Authentic PLCs* includes the credo “Leave your ego at the door, but bring your brains inside” (Venables, 2011, p. 146) to remind PLC facilitators and members alike to put aside self-interest and call their brains to the fore so that they can think deeply about the important work at hand. Our decisions, actions, and priorities must not be tainted by what serves our own egos but instead be guided by what is best for student learning.
Most of the PLC facilitator’s responsibilities just listed will fall into place as long as he or she strives to keep the team’s interactions at a high level. The remainder of this chapter explores what I refer to as facilitation essentials: balancing content and process, figuring out appropriate facilitation styles for different tasks, building an effective team before you need one, empowering the team, honing nonverbal communication skills, and using protocols.

**Balancing Content and Process**

One of the biggest challenges PLC facilitators face is balancing content and process. To illustrate, guiding a PLC through the steps of a protocol requires the facilitator to move team members through each segment, announcing what is supposed to happen and why and refereeing the discussion as team members make contributions. The facilitator may also make contributions to the discussion, as she is a full-fledged member of the PLC and, like any member of the team, may have valuable insights related to the topic. These are all concerns of content.

At the same time, the PLC facilitator must observe how the protocol is going, asking herself questions like *Are all members contributing? Is the discussion superficial or shallow? Is the body language of any member communicating discomfort with what is being said? Is the conversation straying off topic? Is any member dominating air time? Is the current segment of the protocol running over time? If so, should I allow the conversation to continue or move on to the next piece? Is the discussion helping teacher X, who has put his work on the table for all to review?* These are all concerns of process.

Whereas all other team members can fully immerse themselves in the content of the PLC’s work, the facilitator must necessarily concern herself with both content and process if she is to keep things moving smoothly, maximize the benefits of the discussion at hand, and maintain high-quality discourse. This dual responsibility of maintaining the social capital of her team while engaging as an active member herself can be exhausting—but it’s crucial, ensuring that her team will get the most out of the experience and that student learning will improve as a result of the team’s work. And isn’t that why facilitators are there in the first place?

**Figuring Out the Right Facilitation Style**

As facilitators, we bring to the table our unique personalities, just as we do as classroom teachers. Early in my career, I was told by an administrator that 90 percent of good teaching boils down to personality. I’m not sure that I would place the percentage
quite so high, but I absolutely concur with the sentiment of her claim and suspect a similar conjecture could be made about PLC facilitators.

Some PLC coaches are soft-spoken and emit a warm, caring persona; others who are more “Type A” feel driven to get things done and check items off the meeting’s agenda; still others are no-nonsense but exhibit a permeating sense of humor as they lead the team through various tasks. All of these styles, and many others, can make for effective facilitation. But facilitators must also bear in mind that, independent of their particular style, there are some PLC tasks or protocols that require stronger (or tighter) facilitation and others that call for softer (or looser) facilitation. The decision to facilitate in a tight or loose way should be dictated more by the task at hand than by a facilitator’s preferences or style.

For example, a PLC coach would do well to loosely facilitate a discussion about updating the team’s existing set of norms but tightly facilitate a text-based discussion. If he is too loose in his facilitation of the latter task, the conversation will quickly veer off course and may turn into autobiographical recitations from one or two particularly vocal team members. When this happens, it is immensely difficult to draw the PLC back to the text.

Many considerations go into a facilitator’s decision of how loosely or tightly to run particular parts of a meeting. Factors such as PLC members’ level of trust and buy-in, the facilitator’s level of experience, the type of task at hand, and how seasoned the team is all contribute to the coach’s choice of facilitation style. As such, there is no carved-in-stone list of which PLC tasks call for loose facilitation and which call for tight facilitation, although I do discuss facilitation pointers for various protocols in Part 2 of this book. For now, suffice it to say that PLC coaches—especially new ones—should err on the side of too tight rather than too loose. Like teachers who run an extra-tight ship at the beginning of the school year, they can always back off a bit and loosen their facilitation in time.

Building a Team Before You Need It

I am regularly asked by schools and school districts to do one of the following: (1) build authentic PLCs from the ground up or (2) retool existing PLCs that have floundered in their work, failed to improve student achievement, or morphed into little more than planning or teacher gripe sessions. Personally, I would always rather create a school’s PLCs from scratch than save the established but ineffective ones. Unluckily for me, more schools are in the second camp than in the first.

My first step in improving a school’s ineffective PLCs is to find out the reasons for their lack of success. I discuss some of these reasons in detail in Chapter 2, but here
I will focus on the most common reason for a PLC’s failure: the team has neglected to build a foundation of collaboration among its members. Often, the members of such a team have plunged into the work and begun to set agendas and norms, examine data, and look at teacher work right away without taking time to establish themselves as a strong team. This well-intentioned but misguided way of working usually stems from an ill-trained facilitator who did not realize the importance of engaging the team in experiences that lay a strong initial foundation of collaboration and trust. As a result, the norms set by the team were likely dictated by a few vocal members, and teacher work brought to the table was probably cursorily reviewed and mostly celebrated—no matter how good or bad it was—because the teachers in the PLC didn’t know how to pose questions about or challenge a colleague’s work. Worse yet, the team may have brought up questions or dilemmas in too harsh a way, or the feedback may have been received too defensively, leaving all members with a bad taste in their mouths and feeling ill disposed toward presenting their work again—or engaging in any protocols at all.

The damage done in such a scenario is significant—all because the PLC was more an ill-led collection of individuals than it was a well-facilitated team ready to collaborate. In Chapter 2, I delve more deeply into matters of trust and buy-in. For now, the crux is that at some point in the life of an authentic PLC, there will be hard issues, delicate subjects, and discussions that require participants to take risks, be vulnerable, and trust their fellow PLC members. When they get there, they had better be a strong, established team ready to tackle the challenge. Build the team before you need it.

**Empowering the Team**

High-functioning PLCs exude a clear sense of empowerment in their work. To an outside observer, the members of a successful PLC are all deeply engaged in and committed to the work at hand. All members contribute to the discussion knowing that their remarks matter and that they will be received as valid contributions by their teammates. Team members tacitly embrace personal responsibility for the outcome of their collective labor; they all appear to own every piece of what is happening during the meeting.

The observer of such a team may not be able to tell who the facilitator is; there is no dominant voice or other immediate sign of who is “in charge.” The identity of the facilitator eventually becomes clear because of the profusion of questions she continually asks of both the team as a whole and individual members. These questions are thoughtful and thought-provoking; they have no evaluative or judgmental
component, nor are they thinly disguised suggestions. She asks PLC members to push or challenge their thinking, clarify comments, gain more information. The team responds well to these questions, and ideas spring forth at a dizzying pace. The seriousness of what the PLC members are doing is palpable: humor is injected freely, but it never throws the team off task. The outside observer would be impressed by the professionalism of the group and get the distinct impression that everyone sitting at the meeting wants to be there. The synergy of this team’s interactions is a clear indication that the PLC is greater than the sum of its parts.

All these characteristics of a high-functioning PLC serve as evidence that the team members feel empowered—and, more to the point, that the facilitator of this PLC has empowered the team. She has given team members a voice and validated that voice. She carefully guides the discourse without evaluation or admonishment. She shows all individuals the same abundant respect that they afford her. There is a sense that the facilitator will follow up on suggestions made by the team. Occasionally, the burst of ideas subsides, and there are stretches of silence. These don’t feel awkward; they indicate neither that the team has exhausted all thinking on the topic nor that the members are no longer engaged. Quite the opposite: the silence is a snapshot of what reflective thinking can look like. The PLC facilitator has modeled her own comfort with silence and, in this way, has engendered a tacit norm that silence is OK—that thinking at a deep level requires it. Although this may seem to be a trivial attribute, I can generally tell how seasoned a PLC facilitator is from his or her level of comfort with silence during team discussions.

This high-functioning PLC didn’t just get lucky; the facilitator deliberately took a few key steps to empower her team. The following sections explore these steps.

**Believing in Team Members**

Empowering a teacher team means empowering each teacher on the team. In all cases, it requires an assumption on the part of the facilitator that each teacher, regardless of where he or she is on the buy-in/buy-out continuum (see Chapter 2), is able and willing to engage in high-quality collaboration with his or her colleagues. When a facilitator truly believes that team members can—and clearly communicates this belief through his or her engagement with the team members—they most often will. Inversely, if the facilitator doubts team members’ ability and willingness—and communicates that message—then the team will very often prove him or her right. This simple principle of believing in teachers and demonstrating that belief in all interactions with them works amazingly well. People in all professions generally achieve not to the highest level of expectation placed upon them, but to the highest level of belief by leaders that they can (Covey, 2014).
Giving Voice and Choice—and Following Up

Giving the teacher team voice and choice in every possible decision facing the PLC is a good way to empower the team—but it will only work if it's not an empty gesture. It is imperative that the facilitator follow up by listening to team members' voices and honoring their choices. In my own role as facilitator, the decisions I need to make unilaterally are few and far between. Most of the time, the team can decide with me—and then I have the responsibility to go with what they have chosen, even in cases where I would have gone in a different direction. The only exception is when team members' choice is not driven by what is best for students but made for less-honorable reasons (e.g., it's the easiest, most comfortable, or lowest-risk option). If this is not the case, and the team makes its choice in earnest for the right reasons, the facilitator has the responsibility to follow up with the team's decision. Few things endear PLC members to the facilitator more than when the facilitator follows up on the team's decisions and does what she promised to do.

Delegating Tasks

One of the most common pitfalls inexperienced facilitators encounter is trying to do everything themselves. No matter how well-intentioned this might be, it is harmful for two reasons. First, it detracts from the facilitator's primary role—increasing and maintaining the team’s social capital—and its attendant responsibilities. The facilitator must maintain a strong focus on leading the team through the task at hand and delegate other roles (e.g., timekeeping, recording meeting notes, bringing X or Y to the next meeting) to the other teachers on the team. Facilitators should get in the habit of asking for volunteers to do these tasks and, if none comes forward, directly requesting the help of a teammate: “Carla, would you bring copies of our curriculum map for Unit 4 to the next meeting so we can take a look at it?” or “Jimmy, would you mind being timekeeper for this protocol?” My routine line is “OK, we all decided last meeting that we would do X; who would like to do Y, Z, and W?” Simple, direct, and effective.

The second danger in not delegating tasks is that if the facilitator does everything, the team will always expect him or her to do everything. This leads to a lack of investment from team members. Effective PLC facilitators get teachers on the team to put some skin in the game. Teachers who invest their time and effort for the good of the team, even in small or relatively insignificant ways, are more likely to feel as though they are a part of the whole and invest themselves in pursuing the team’s common goals. Multiply this effect by six or seven teachers, and the team as a whole becomes considerably empowered.
Honing Nonverbal Communication Skills

When I am asked to be part of a conference call with the administrators of a school or district, I often suggest that we converse in a Google hangout. Google hangouts are video conferences, much like Skype, that permit as many as 10 participants and include a screen-sharing capability that lets users share documents, graphics, or statistics as well as see one another’s faces. Facial expressions and other physical cues are powerful signs of how people are thinking and feeling.

Classroom teachers get very good at reading their students’ facial expressions and body language. This skill becomes useful in facilitating a team of teachers during a PLC meeting. Picking up nonverbal cues that indicate confusion, disagreement, trepidation, reflective thinking, boredom, off-topic thinking, hesitancy to speak or ask a question, irritation with another member, skepticism with what is being shared, and so forth can provide valuable information to the facilitator. Becoming adept at observing these nonverbal cues and addressing the thoughts and feelings they indicate not only show PLC members that the facilitator is paying attention and cares about the members of the team but also can defuse a situation that might blow up into a bigger issue if verbalized. It’s important not to get hyper-focused on our agendas or the steps of a protocol lest we miss what is happening right in front of us in the minds and hearts of our teammates.

Using Protocols

The use of protocols has become widespread in teacher teams and PLCs throughout the United States—and for good reason. If you’re unfamiliar with protocols, here’s my definition:

A protocol is a set of guidelines for having a focused, structured conversation about some aspect of teaching and learning. Teacher teams use them for a wide range of applications. There are protocols for looking at student work, looking at teacher work, having discussions centered on an article or piece of text, reviewing student data, analyzing a dilemma a teacher might be having, and many other purposes. (Venables, 2015a, para. 4)

Protocols are useful tools for teacher teams, particularly for facilitators. The structure that protocols provide helps the facilitator keep discussions focused, fair, and substantive. Protocols that are used to discuss teacher work (e.g., a teacher-designed
assessment, a lesson plan, a teaching strategy or activity, or a teacher-made rubric) culminate in practical suggestions for making specific improvements to the work under discussion. As a rule, after a PLC goes through a protocol, the team members follow up by applying their learning in the classroom.

Throughout this book, I incorporate vignettes illustrating the work and interactions of a fictional 8th grade social studies PLC. These “Fly on the Wall” scenarios are intended to illuminate, extend, and bring together the ideas discussed in the chapter. Here is a look at the PLC’s interpersonal context:

- **Angie** is the hard-working, selfless facilitator of the team. She is in her eighth year of teaching middle school social studies and has a reputation as a good teacher. She has been trained to facilitate and is eager to put her newly acquired skill set into practice.

- **Bruce**, the assistant football coach of the school district’s high school, has been teaching for 15 years. He is skeptical about PLC work and generally uninterested in what is happening until the discussion bears consequence that will affect his 8th grade son, who is in Cassandra’s class. Bruce’s lack of interest is hardly clandestine; he has been known to write football plays during meetings. His teacher ego is solid, even if his teaching at times is not.

- **Cassandra** has spent her entire 10-year career teaching at the same middle school. She is a very good teacher, adored by kids and parents alike. Her personality is dominant, practical, and opinionated. Cassandra has bought into the PLC work because she can see the difference it can make for kids. Her teacher identity is as strong as her opinions tend to be.

- **Devin** is a quiet, sincere, sometimes wryly funny teacher who is in his fifth year of teaching. He doesn’t make waves, but he has no spark, either. His teaching ability is average. Although he is not committed to the work of the PLC, he is compliant and does what is asked of him. His contributions to the PLC discussions are few and tend to be superficial.

- **Evelyn**, like Cassandra, is opinionated, but she also has a very nurturing side. She has been teaching for 28 years and is formerly the lead teacher on the team. She is National Board Certified, but an observer of her class wouldn’t necessarily see anything stellar going on; she is very traditional and tends to spoon-feed students. Still, she is well liked by the community.

The following Fly on the Wall explores our 8th grade PLC’s first day using a protocol.
What Happened

After engaging her team in a brief discussion about what protocols are, why they are useful, and how they differ from activities, Angie outlines the key steps of the Notice & Wonder Protocol for Data [see Chapter 8], passes out copies of the protocol, and asks her team to read it quietly.1

Angie begins the Notice & Wonder Protocol for Data with her team, reading each step immediately before executing it. She emphasizes the difference between *Notice* and *Wonder* statements so that the team is clear.2 Even so, Evelyn has a clarifying question, which Angie answers.

After Angie recruits a timekeeper (Bruce) and a scribe for the Notice and Wonder statements (Evelyn), the team proceeds with the Notice round. There is no discussion, except as in the following exchange:

**Evelyn:** I notice the girls scored 14 percentage points higher than the boys on figurative language.

**Devin:** Maybe they talk more?

**Angie:** Let’s try and remember that our goal is just to observe things in the data. Please don’t speculate on possible causes.3

The team moves to the Wonder round. Angie reminds the teachers of the characteristics of Wonder statements and tells them that she may ask follow-up questions during this round. After a half-dozen Wonder statements, the following exchange occurs:

**Cassandra:** I wonder if on Standard SS8H3, they really understand the causes of the American Revolution or are simply memorizing the causes.

**Angie:** Let’s explore that a moment. [To the team] What are we doing or not doing that might be encouraging memorizing versus understanding the causes?4

For the next eight minutes, the team engages in a short but substantive discussion that has clear connections to instruction.5

*See also The First Day of Protocols (Part 2) on page 69.

(continued)
What’s Worth Noting

1Before the team even begins the protocol, Angie has explained its purpose, provided a general outline of what to expect during the protocol, and given team members time to read it in advance of doing it. This encourages a degree of comfort and open-mindedness among team members as they embark on something new.

2Protocols run smoothly when the members of a PLC are crystal-clear on what they are expected to do in each segment of the protocol. By taking the time to read through each step and preemptively clear up any possible confusion between two related ideas (in this case, Notice versus Wonder statements), Angie lays out a smooth path for her team to follow.

3Devin’s remark, although thoughtless and verging on sexist, was meant to be humorous and probably stemmed from his own nervousness. However, Angie called out his break from the protocol as though he were seriously posing an observation. To be sure, it is important for her to call out members when they are not following the protocol or when they say something offensive to others. In this case, however, she misread Devin’s intent and came off as somewhat militant in following the “rules.” Admonishing a teacher for a passing joke can actually take the team farther off track than simply moving on, so facilitators should carefully consider their interventions.

4It is imperative that, at every possible turn, the PLC conversation get to instruction. This is where the seeds of instructional improvement are often planted. When Cassandra made her Wonder statement, Angie seized the moment to dive more deeply into matters of instruction. Seasoned PLC facilitators are continually looking for member-initiated opportunities to discuss instruction.

5In time, with a little persistence on Angie’s part, making connections to and discussing instruction become the culture of the PLC. When this happens, members of the PLC initiate the instructional connections with little prodding from the facilitator.

In Part 2 of this book, I discuss specific protocols and strategies to facilitate them and maximize the gains they yield. Before we get there, however, we must focus on developing strong, authentic PLCs. To that end, Chapter 2 examines the nature of teacher trust and buy-in—and how to get it.
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Daniel R. Venables is an education consultant and the founding director of the Center for Authentic PLCs, an organization committed to assisting schools in building, leading, and sustaining authentic PLCs and doing well the important tasks in which authentic PLCs engage. Through the Center, he developed the Grapple™ Institutes, which have trained hundreds of teacher leaders to become highly effective PLC facilitators. He is the author of the national best-seller How Teachers Can Turn Data into Action (ASCD, 2014) and The Practice of Authentic PLCs: A Guide to Effective Teacher Teams (Corwin, 2011). He frequently presents at national conferences and writes as a guest blogger for national education blogs, including TeachersCount and EdWeek.

Mr. Venables’s experience in education as an award-winning classroom teacher, a speaker and consultant, and a professional development coordinator with the United States’ 18th-largest district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, spans more than 30 years. He has spent 24 years as a classroom teacher in both public and independent schools in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Connecticut, serving as a department chair for 18 of those years. In 2002 he was awarded South Carolina Independent School Teacher of the Year. As far back as 1993–1994, he was trained as a Math/Science Fellow with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), where he began his experience with Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) and their offspring, professional learning communities (PLCs). Since that time, he has assisted dozens of rural and urban schools throughout the United States in developing high-functioning teacher
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Mr. Venables’s presentation style is energetic and humorous, and his message is practical, rooted in his experiences in the classroom and working with teachers. Whether presenting at national conferences or offering ongoing, site-based assistance to individual schools, he is always well received by teachers and administrators. At the heart of it, Mr. Venables cares deeply for kids, their teachers, and the work that authentic professional learning communities can do to make a real impact on how much and how many kids learn. He can be contacted at dvenables@authenticPLCs.com or at 803-206-3578, or on Twitter (@authenticplcs). Contact him if you would like information about bringing a Grapple Institute to your school or district.
Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

PD Online® Courses

Leading Professional Learning: Building Capacity Through Teacher Leaders (#PD13OC010M)

Schools as Professional Learning Communities: An Introduction (#PD09OC28)

Print Products

*The Artisan Teaching Model for Instructional Leadership: Working Together to Transform Your School* by Kenneth Baum and David Krulwich (#116041)

*How Teachers Can Turn Data into Action* by Daniel R. Venables (#114007)

*Protocols for Professional Learning* (The Professional Learning Community Series) by Lois Brown Easton (#109037)


*Taking Charge of Professional Development: A Practical Model for Your School* by Joseph H. Semadeni (#109029)

*Teacher Teamwork: How do we make it work?* (ASCD Arias) by Margaret Searle and Marilyn Swartz (#SF115045)

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