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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD



Best Practice Can Be Habit Forming

The question is not, “do we have habits of professional practice” but rather, “do our habits of professional practice promote high levels of learning for all?”

Have you ever stopped to think about how teams develop habits of practice? Is it a conscious, purposeful, and intentional process that reflects what we know about best practice? Or do habits evolve haphazardly in a random and arbitrary fashion over an extended period of time? And, to what are our habits of professional practice aligned? Do they reflect current thinking and research in the field or are they based more on history and past precedent? Are our habits aligned with and supportive of the school’s mission? Have we identified the mission-critical habits of professional practice we should aspire to in our school?

Best practice doesn’t become habit forming by chance; it is the combination of clarity, feedback, and support that produces productive habits of professional practice. When teacher teams have established the right habits, it doesn’t matter if they are challenged by a new set of standards,

implementation of new curricula, or changes in student demographics; they consistently respond in ways that promote high levels of learning for all.

Behaviors, Routines and Habits

Routine is at the heart of every habit. Routines consist of behaviors and habits formed when specific behaviors become routines that are repeated regularly over an extended period of time. Routines can be positive or negative; some routines create positive momentum while other routines spark a downward spiral. In a PLC, principals and coaches help collaborative teams create the positive routines that develop into healthy habits of professional practice.

Driving a car has become a habit for most of us. At one time, buckling a seatbelt or checking the mirrors were specific behaviors that had to be performed very consciously. Those

behaviors eventually became part of a routine which, after considerable practice and repetition, became a habit. We don't think about seatbelts and mirrors when driving a car; it is second nature to us.

What we ask teams to do is analogous to driving a car; we want their best PLC practice to become second nature to them. At one time, identifying learning targets, designing common assessments, and providing additional time and support for students who did or did not learn were separate, independent behaviors teams had to approach consciously with purpose, but the most effective principals and coaches have helped the best teams integrate those behaviors into regular routines that eventually became habits.

Clarity: Create Routines Around the Right Work

To bring greater clarity to the PLC process, principals and coaches should ask, "Are our collaborative teams clear about which practices deserve more time and attention?"

If the mission is to ensure all students learn to high levels, the first step in the process is to clarify which practices are critical to accomplishing that mission. Those mission-critical best practices are the behaviors teams identify that turn into routines and eventually become habits.

Team meetings are filled with routines. Simply convening the weekly team meeting is a routine that becomes so commonplace teachers notice when they miss a meeting. Within the meeting there are other regular routines like reviewing the norms, stating the meeting's purpose, using an agenda, assigning roles and responsibilities, and relying on a consensus decision making process. All of these routines help promote more productive team meetings.

More importantly, teams establish routines in response to the four critical questions of learning. They routinely begin the unit planning process by identifying and unwrapping the highest priority standards; drafting a common assessment; analyzing data and evidence of learning; and creating opportunities for students to access more time and support when they do or do not learn. All of these routines are deeply embedded in how the most effective teams engage in the right work.

Feedback: Reinforce Routines Around the Right Work

Positive feedback can ensure a team's behaviors, routines and habits align with what we know is best practice. If coaches and principals focus on how teams become more effective and reinforce productive behavior with the right feedback, the likelihood teams will replicate that behavior increases.

Those coaching collaborative teams are intentional with their feedback. Effective feedback can reduce the risk teachers feel when trying new classroom strategies. Feedback from principals and coaches can also confront

behaviors that are counter-productive to the habits teams are trying to create and redirect routines when teams fail to engage in the right work. Creating clear expectations generates the kind of positive peer pressure teams need to be successful. The goal should be to provide feedback to reinforce behaviors that are aligned with best practice, create routines that are repeated over an extended period of time, and encourage the development of productive habits of professional practice.

Support: Build Capacity Around the Right Work

The most effective principals and coaches view their role as one of building the capacity of teams to do the right work. Coaches should never do for teams what teams can do themselves, but coaches can help teams identify what practices are most important, create routines that support those practices, and guide the development of habits around each team's professional practice.

The support teams receive is invaluable but, when a principal or coach sets team goals, analyzes assessment data, and determines next steps, they are not building the team's capacity; in fact, when those who coach starts *doing* the work instead of *supporting* the work they actually diminish the team's capacity.

Coaches should guard against imposing their own personal or preferred routines on teams. People support that which they help create and so coaching is much more effective when the coaching support is focused on helping teams identify and articulate the specific behaviors which lead to the creation of routines and ultimately become habits of professional practice.

Best practice can be habit forming if the right professional practice becomes persistently present within the culture of our collaborative teams.

The goal of coaching collaborative teams is to help teams get better and getting better, and in a PLC the most effective teams develop habits of professional practice around the right work. Principals and coaches help clarify which mission-critical practices teams should embrace, provide teams with the right kind of feedback at the right time, and support teams in their efforts to ensure all students learn to high levels. ■

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