

PRACTICE-FOCUSED COLLABORATION

Getting better together, efficiently

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All organizations change if they are to continue to exist. The change may be gradual and incremental, or at times more dramatic, even transformational. But change is inevitable, desirable, and most productive when the current conditions are understood, and possible futures are mapped. Change is harnessed for good when managed with purpose and forethought, with attention to both the change process and the emerging evidence of results.

The act of learning is a change in what an individual knows and can do. For an organization, learning precedes, propels, accompanies, and is derived from change. The Matt Damon character in the movie *The Martian*, marooned on the distant planet, found his way back to Earth by first surviving day to day on Mars. He called on what he knew, learned quickly to fill the gaps, analyzed a difficult, nearly impossible situation, and modified his environment in order to survive. To be more specific, he counted the number of potatoes in his storage compartment, calculated how many eyes (seeds) each could produce, determined how much time it took to grow a new potato plant and how many potatoes it would produce, and carefully reckoned how many potatoes he must eat each day to ingest calories sufficient to stay alive until a rescue ship could arrive. Back home, he summarized his survival technique this way:

When I was up there, stranded by myself, did I think I was going to die? Yes. Absolutely, and that's what you need to know going in because it's going to happen to you. This is space. It does not cooperate. At some point everything is going to go south on you. Everything is going to go south and you're going to say 'This is it. This is how I end.' Now you can either accept that or you can get to work. That's all it is. **You just begin. You do the math, you solve one problem. Then you solve the next one, and then the next and if you solve enough problems you get to come home.**

The Heath brothers, in their 2010 book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, applied the Martian's method of learning and controlling small but critical elements to organizational change. "Many leaders pride themselves on setting high-level direction: *I'll set the vision and stay out of the details*. It's true that a compelling vision is critical. But it's not enough. Big-picture, hands-off leadership isn't likely to work in a change situation, because the hardest part of change—the paralyzing part—is **precisely in the details**" (p. 53).

In education, the details are the daily practices in every classroom and every office, what the teachers, leaders, and support staff do in their roles to pursue the school's goals. A school's goals express the collective desires for each of its students, what the students know, what they are able to do, how they

behave, and how they manage their own learning. The ultimate goal in school improvement is for the people associated with the school to drive its continuous improvement for the sake of their own children and students. They do this by sharpening their practice, honing each specific practice, every day, just as the Martian tended his Martian potato crop, precisely husbanding each plant each day.

The Martian had to solve his problems alone. There was no one else there to help him. But in education, we are surrounded by other people, sometimes to our distraction, but also to our advantage, and theirs, if we adopt an effective process to assist each other in sharpening our practice. We call this **practice-focused collaboration**.

Practice-focused collaboration rests upon these understandings:

1. The practices are known and their most effective expression—the “best” practices—recognized.
2. Best practice is determined by its contribution, even as a link in a causal chain, to specified goals or objectives.
3. Two or more people engage in scrutiny of each other’s practices and, shoulder-to-shoulder, endeavor to improve them.
4. Best practices are held alongside estimates of each person’s actual and routine application of the practice, the difference is ascertained, and steps taken to close the gap.
5. Innovation results from tweaking a practice in a way that proves more effective in achieving the desired outcomes than what was considered best practice.

The term “collaboration” has too often suggested wasteful chatter, low-energy work by several people that is best done individually by people with talent and dedication to the task. But the ability to improve one’s own practice has limits that constructive engagement with colleagues can overcome. In fact, the feedback, critique, challenge, correction, and encouragement from someone external to the self is critical to self-improvement. Think of the piano teacher. The gymnastics coach. The professional mentor. The parent. And, of course, every teacher in every classroom. Getting better requires personal effort aimed at an external standard; it is accelerated by feedback and guidance from a knowledgeable arbiter of progress.

In the 1997 movie *The Edge*, an elderly businessman, played by Anthony Hopkins, fighting to survive in a wilderness, calmly faces every danger, including outwitting an enraged bear, with ingenuity and courage, summing up his philosophy of life as, “What one man can do, another can do.” The Hopkins character, to survive, was forced to develop skills far beyond his expertise as a businessman, and mostly on his own. His goal of survival assumed sharp relief when he was confronted by a huge, angry bear. His first goal: Kill the bear. No other goal was necessary until that one was achieved. He focused on perfection of little things to accomplish the big goal.

The take-away from *The Edge* is that what one teacher can do, another can do. What one principal can do, another can do. In other words, practice-focused collaboration begins with an unassailable confidence in each person’s potential for polishing each practice to a fine sheen. This is an attitude quite different from one of probing for weakness and improving by replacement of staff. Practice-focused collaboration is built

on a foundation of trust. It requires each person’s openness to change in their own practice and sincere desire for the success of colleagues. Collaboration thrives on candor, humility, and the willingness to give and receive honest appraisals of professional practice.

Bryk and Schneider (2002), in a study of 400 schools, demonstrated the connection between high levels of trust among principals, teachers, students, and parents and the students’ high performance on standardized tests. This trust is deepened when a principal demonstrates the recognition that many teachers are likely to possess greater knowledge than their principal about their subject, their students, and the most effective pedagogies for teaching that subject and those students. Through practice-focused collaboration with teachers, the principal can draw on the teachers’ individual and collective experience and expertise—questioning, listening, encouraging along the way. The principal should also encourage and support practice-focused collaboration among teachers apart from the principal, whether one-to-one, in grade-level groups, or in any other configuration. Discussion of practice becomes the *lingua franca* of daily conversation. A principal develops mutual trust by showing a willingness to put his or her own professional practice out on the table to be collaboratively examined for the principal’s own improvement of practice.

Practices and Indicators of Effective Practice

Best practices for leading and teaching, including those designated as evidence-based or effective practices, are general statements of how work is best done, substantiated by research and experience. For example, the *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement* (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Redding, McCauley, Jackson, & Dunn, 2018), lists three practices for each of its four domains. An example of a leadership practice is: *Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency*. Good idea, but what exactly is it that should be done, and who does it? One of three indicators *Four Domains* provides for the practice is “School Leadership Team itemizes and appropriately distributes leadership functions among faculty.” In other words, for each practice, concrete examples of how it looks in action are expressed as indicators.

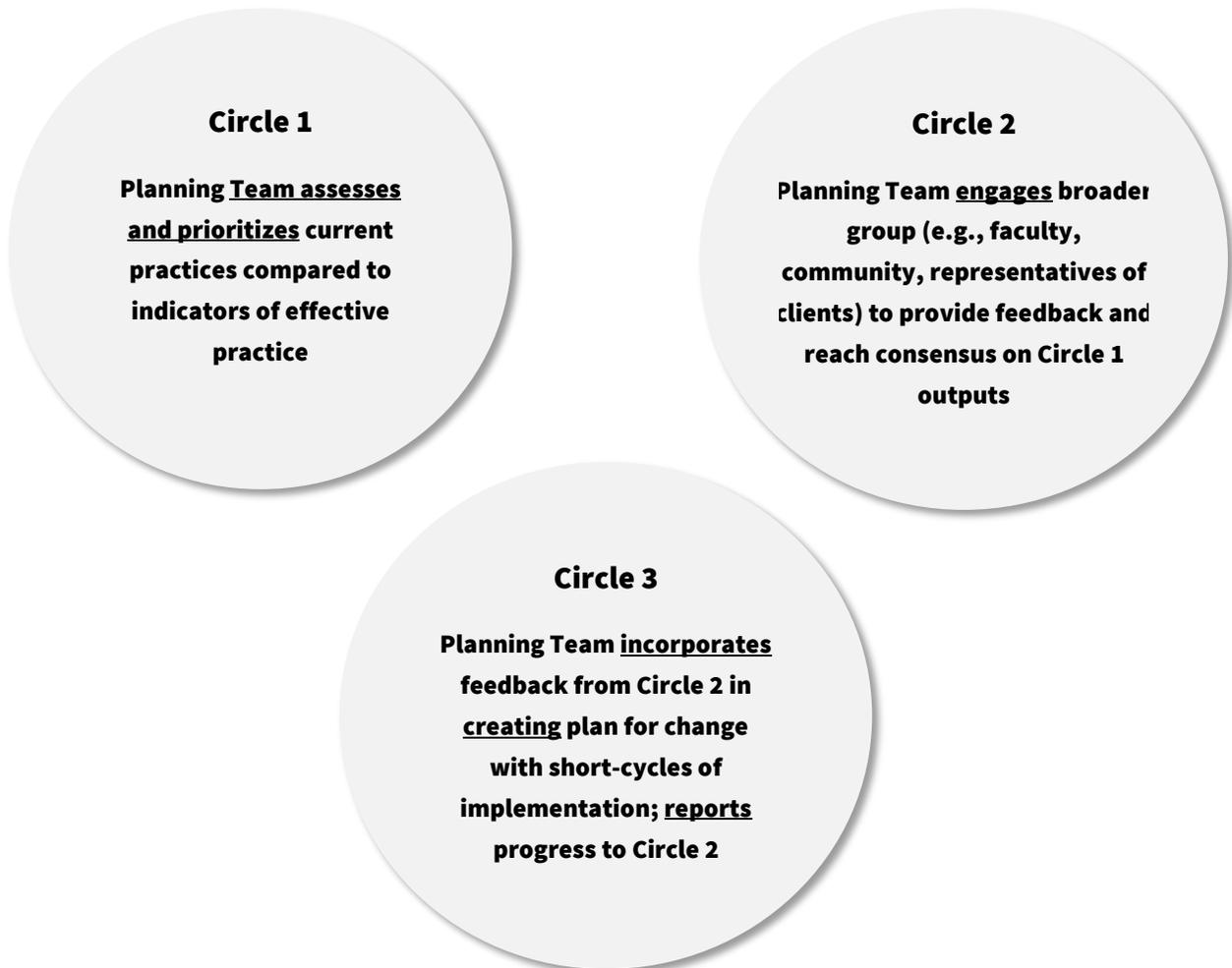
An indicator of effective practice is what Redding (2013) calls a concrete behavioral expression of a particular professional practice that research has shown to contribute to student learning. Indicators are expressed in plain language so practitioners can identify with greater certainty whether a relevant practice is standard and routinely operational or whether more work is needed. Several indicators describe with greater specificity aspects of a practice. The indicator methodology in education was derived from the school reform work at the Laboratory of Student Success at Temple University (see, for example, Redding, 2006).

A Three Phase Process for Practice-Focused Collaboration

As we have suggested, two people can engage in practice-focused collaboration, each helping the other improve their practices toward an agreed upon standard. But practice-focused collaboration is also a key component of school improvement, with practices and indicators forming the core of how the organization continuously gets better. See, for example, *Utilizing integrated resources to implement the school and district improvement cycle and supports: Guidance for schools, districts, and state education agencies*

(Layland & Corbett, 2017). Practices and indicators also form the basis for needs assessment, as described in *Using needs assessments for school and district improvement: A tactical guide* (Corbett & Redding, 2017).

The Three-Phase Process for Practice-Focused Collaboration, sometimes referred to as Three Circles, has been applied to many organizational contexts, including state education agencies, district and school improvement, instructional transformation, rural school associations, and Native American consortia. Varied according to the context in which it functions, the three phases, or circles, *each itself a collaboration*, are:



The result of the three circles of collaboration is a plan formed with the full engagement of the people whose practices it is aimed at improving. The collaboration does not end there. Constructive change requires consistent monitoring of progress and adjustments in course based on feedback. Strategic management of organizational performance advances through incremental notching up of each person's practice, getting better together, efficiently (Layland & Redding, 2017; 2021).

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