The Main Idea's Discussion Questions for *Leaders of Learning*

This book addresses a number of *large* issues – from changing the way principals supervise teachers to organizing teachers into results-oriented collaborative teams. Because these are overwhelming issues to tackle at once, especially if they are new to your school or district, below are simply **a few questions** district or school leaders can discuss with their leadership teams to begin to grapple with these important issues. There are also **a few implementation suggestions** as well.

Question: Lazy teachers or lack of capacity? In the book, the authors write that many recent educational reforms have been about giving schools and teachers *incentives* (such as money, good press, or status) to perform better or *sanction*s when they perform poorly (such as bad press, bad "grades," firing teachers, or shutting down entire schools). However, the authors claim that this reward system assumes that teachers have had the *ability* to help all students succeed all along, but simply lacked the motivation or were unwilling to do the work. In contrast, the authors believe that teachers have lacked the *collective capacity to help all students learn* in the existing structures and cultures where they work. What do you think about these contrasting ideas?

Question: How well do you do PLCs? In order to truly improve education, the authors believe that rather than doling out more sanctions and incentives, we need to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They believe that setting up authentic **professional learning communities** (PLCs) is the best way to achieve this goal. There is a lot of misconception about what a PLC actually is. As a team, take a look at the 3 big ideas of a PLC on p.1 of the summary and discuss how well you believe your school implements each bullet on a scale of 1 to 5.

Question 3: District support – autonomy or top-down? The authors say schools cannot maintain success without the appropriate support from the district. How would you categorize the relationship between the school and the district? Where on the pendulum would you place the school – is it closer to the autonomous side or is it more controlled by the district in a top-down approach?

Question 4: How do principals maximize their impact on instruction? The authors discuss the need to change the role of principals so they can have *more* of an impact on teaching and learning. They give an example. Say that a principal has 50 teachers and tries to find creative ways to interact with 50 people to "supervise them into better practice," often with the old model of pre-observation, observation, post-observation, and a conference. Instead, with a collaborative team model, the principal meets regularly with 7 teams, and in the meantime, these teams meet weekly to ensure that each student's progress is monitored by common formative assessments and evidence of student learning is used to improve teacher practice. Discuss the difference between the principal's impact on teaching and learning with the old model vs. the new model.

Question 5: How do schools implement more effective, research-backed principal actions? One of the authors, Robert Marzano, collaborated on research about effective school leadership and found 21 principal actions that had a *positive* effect on teachers. The authors claim that it is difficult for *one* principal to exhibit all of these qualities, and that a PLC helps to spread leadership among all of the team leaders, and in fact, covers 19 of these 21 research-based principal actions. Below is an excerpted list of the 19 principal responsibilities (from pp.52-53 in the book). Discuss how well the current leadership team at your school demonstrates these actions and whether a PLC might add to the number of leadership actions that could be covered. Note this is excerpted from research done by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, in *School leadership that works*.

Research-based Principal Action that Has a Positive Effect on Teachers	*How well do our leaders do this?*	*How well might a PLC do this?*
1. Providing affirmation/celebration of staff effort/achievement		
2. Challenging the status quo as change agent		
3. Establishing school-wide processes for effective communication		
4. Shaping assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that make up the school's culture		
5. Demonstrating flexibility in meeting different needs of teams and being willing to make modifications to school procedures		
6. Focusing on clear goals and relentlessly pursuing priorities		
7. Articulating ideals and beliefs that drive the school's day-to-day work		
8. Soliciting input from staff in the design and implementation of procedures and policies		
9. Regularly engaging staff in review and discussion of promising practices to improve student learning		
10. Participating in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment		
11. Demonstrating interest in and knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment		
12. Creating processes to monitor school's practices and their effect on student learning		
13. Creating the conditions that optimize school improvement efforts		
14. Establishing clear procedures and orderly routines		
15. Serving as a spokesperson/advocate for the school and staff		
16. Establishing a positive working relationship with each member of the staff		
17. Providing teachers with the resources, materials, and support to help them succeed		
18. Using the informal undercurrents of the school to be proactive in addressing problems/concerns		
19. Being visible throughout the school and having positive interactions with staff and students		

Question 6: How well do you support teacher teams? Many schools have teachers working in teams but these are often plagued by a "culture of nice" and don't really improve student achievement. Rather than leaving teacher teams alone and hoping for the best, the authors outline 7 ways leaders can support teams. Discuss how well your leadership provides these 7 types of support (see p.5 of the summary for more detail): (1) organize staff into meaningful teams, (2) provide teams with time to collaborate, (3) help teams set clear expectations and goals, (4) clarify the work teams must accomplish, (5) monitor the work of teams and provide support and direction, (6) avoid shortcuts, and (7) celebrate short-term wins while confronting those who do not contribute to the team.

Action: If your teacher teams find it difficult to go beyond a culture of nice and move toward honest and rigorous assessment of student learning and teacher practice, email me (Jenn) and I will send you a useful article to distribute to teacher leaders – this could be a great article for a discussion with them. This might also be a helpful article for your leadership team to read as well!

Question 7: What tasks should your teacher teams start to work on? There are so many different components of a PLC, how do you know where to have your teacher teams start? The authors suggest that teams look at the questionnaire online at go.solution-tree.com/plcbooks under the book *Learning By Doing* (a different book by DuFour and colleagues), then click on "Critical Issues for Team Consideration." As a leadership team, take a look at and discuss the excerpt of the questionnaire below (or print out the entire questionnaire). Which areas would your teams rate more highly and which areas would they need more assistance to improve?

Rating (1-10)	Critical Issues for Team Consideration
	We have identified team norms and protocols.
	We have analyzed student achievement data and have established SMART goals and are working interdependently to improve student achievement.
	Each member of the team is clear about what students must know for our course/grade level and for each unit.
	We have aligned the curriculum with all necessary standards and high-stakes assessments.
	We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student's mastery of essential learning.
	We use the results of each common assessment to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
	We use the results of each common assessment to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
	We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
	We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
	We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice a year.

Action: – Consider distributing your own list of "Critical Issues for Team Consideration" and for each item, list a *product* that you expect will come from the team's work. For example, from the first item ("We have identified team norms and protocols") you might expect a list of team norms. Other items might include SMART goals, lists of essential outcomes for each unit, common formative assessments teams plan to use, lists of students who need additional time and support, etc. Then, work with staff to develop a timeline of when teacher teams will complete products to turn in to you. This will keep the teams on track and help you to monitor their work and provide feedback when you meet with each team. Below is a sketch of the beginning of a simple timeline:

Date to turn in:	September 5	September 15	September 15	September 20
Team product:	List of team norms	SMART goals	Essential outcomes for first two units	First common formative assessment

Question 8: How does your school respond when students don't learn? How do different teachers at your school respond when students struggle to learn? Does Mr. Jones stay late to help students with their writing? Does Ms. Rodriguez allow students to rework math problems until they get them right? The authors argue that whether or not students receive support should *not* differ depending on who their teachers are. Instead, there should be a *school-wide, systematic* approach to intervention. Discuss how well your current system of support works for your struggling students. Can you actually call it a "system" or does it depend on which teacher(s) the struggling student has? Take a look at the criteria for *Effective Systems of Intervention* below and explained in more detail on p.9 of the summary. How many of these characteristics does your current approach have?

Do you already have *effective instruction* for everyone? Is your approach *proactive*? Does your plan rely on a *frequent* and *timely assessment* process? Do you have *additional time* built into the day for struggling learners? Do you *require* struggling learners to come for intervention? Is your intervention plan *fluid* and *flexible*? Does the plan communicate student needs in *specific* and *precise* language? Does the intervention plan account for *different types of non-learners*? Overall, is the plan *systematic*?

Action: If your leadership team has *not* answered in the affirmative to all of the criteria of an effective intervention plan listed above, consider putting together a committee and having them develop an action plan to do some research (perhaps starting with reading Chapter 8 in this book, "Responding When Kids Don't Learn") and come up with several proposals for creating a systematic approach to addressing the needs of students who struggle at your school (or in your district).