

Professional Development Brief

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Dennis has been a good friend and valuable resource to the California Staff Development Council. He has participated in several Colloquia as a moderator or presenter and always enriches the event with his thought-provoking reflections and innovative ideas.



TAKING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THAT IMPROVES STUDENT LEARNING

BY DENNIS SPARKS

I want to speak to you as staff development leaders, that is, as people who are decision makers, designers, and inventors. I propose that as staff development leaders, you can make profound differences, not only in individuals but also in organizations and systems.

The main process by which I want to engage you is dialogue. In this dialogue process, I will be saying my assumptions to you and you will be getting clear about your own assumptions. Trying to have this kind of dialogue in a large group is not easy, so as I share some of my assumptions, I will be asking you to consider what your own assumptions are. The point is to get clearer about recognizing other people's assumptions as well as your own.

Let me start with saying some of the things that I want—for kids and for professional development.

- *I want a system of schools to which you or any parent would send your child to any classroom in any school.* Nothing less than that is acceptable. John Dewey said it very well: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all of its children."

- *I want professional development to be outcomes focused.* I want us to get clear about what we want to create and how professional learning will help us create it.

- *I want professional learning that is focused on making a difference for kids.* There is learning for learning's sake, which is a wonderful thing. But what I'm talking about here is learning for action's sake—learning for making decisions about what you're going to do.

Dee Hock says, "Have a simple, clear purpose which gives rise to complex intelligent behavior, rather than complex rules and regulations that give rise to simplistic thinking and stupid behavior." If we're doing professional development well, we will see complex intelligent behavior. If

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what we see is stupid, simplistic behavior, then we have failed.

Linda Darling-Hammond says that it is clear that “most schools and teachers cannot produce the kind of learning demanded by the new reforms—not because they do not want to, but because they do not know how, and the systems they work in do not support them in doing so.”

She is making an assumption here, and she is saying something that I also hold to be true.

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Take 30 seconds to formulate for yourself what you would say, if you were responding to Linda Darling-Hammond’s statement.

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Examining Our Assumptions About Professional Development

A number of years ago, when I gave talks, I would say that I thought 95% of staff development wasn’t much good. The first time I said it, I expected to be contradicted. Then the second time I said it, I expected to be contradicted. When I got up to about the tenth or the twentieth time, I thought, “I’m not going to be challenged on this. No one is going to come up to me and tell me that I’m wrong.”

Why is staff development of such low quality? I wanted to go deeply into this question—past the conventional answers and into the root causes, the fundamental issues. I also wanted to find more powerful approaches to addressing the issue.

The following statements represent my claims about the problem:

1. There is a low level of implementation of staff development practices associated with improving student learning.

2. Best practices don’t move from classroom to classroom and around the school.

3. Most of us, professionally and otherwise, use only a small portion of what we already know.

Those are pretty big claims.

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Take two minutes to talk to a colleague about what your own claims or assumptions are about the current status of professional development.

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I created a little exercise that I would encourage you to do after you formulate your claims. I asked myself *why* I think each of these statements is true. For example, when I asked *why* there is a low level of implementation of quality staff development practices to improve student learning, I came up with four reasons:

(1) The ideas and practices have not spread to all schools. People don’t do what they don’t know.

(2) Even if the ideas or practices have been introduced, people’s understanding of them is not very deep. They know the terms or the list or the guidelines, but they don’t know enough to put them into practice.

(3) Our current mental models, that is, our assumptions and belief systems, support current practice.

My assumption here, of course, is that our mental models affect what we do. If you change people’s practices without changing their mental models, they will keep getting pulled back to their old ways.

(4) Educators do not set ambitious goals for student learning. You don’t need very good staff development to get to mediocre goals. Good staff development is really only necessary if you have ambitious goals such as high levels of learning for all of the students.

I then took my inquiry a step further by looking at each of these four reasons and asking myself why each seems to be true. This process led me to three possible “root causes”: a low sense of efficacy; limiting mental models; and the design of teachers’ work days. (See TABLE 1.)

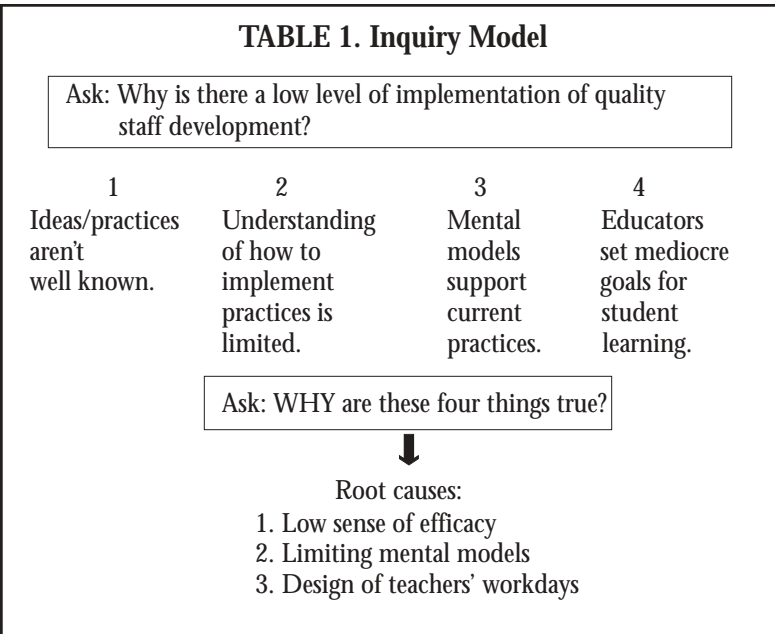
What did I discover by doing this investigation? Here are the big ideas I came up with and will be discussing here today:

1. *The barriers are not what we think they are.* They are mostly habits of thought and behavior—fundamental choices, mental models, and “big assumptions” that limit possibility and invention. Time is important, but it is secondary because I believe that most schools can find more time for professional learning if they have a really productive use for it.

2. *The existing talents and creative potential of educators are a vast and untapped resource.*

3. *Leaders matter a lot and individuals can make a profound difference.*

TABLE 1. Inquiry Model



CHANGING BELIEFS LEAD TO CHANGING PRACTICES

Rosa Smith, former superintendent of the Columbus, Ohio, public schools, tells the story of waking up one morning and listening to a report on the radio about the high percentage of young people of color who end up in jail. Most of these are male.

As she listened, she began to realize “that educators are not just in the reading or math or science business. We are very much in the business of saving lives.” It wasn’t just about kids learning to read because reading was the gateway to everything. It was about teaching kids to read—particularly children of color—as a matter of life or death.

She found that when that switch happened, she went to different meetings and when she was at those meetings, she said different things. “If educators truly believe in the bigger mission. . . this view will determine forever the way we think about our work, talk about our work, and do our work. It will influence dramatically how and with whom we spend our time, what we will tolerate and what we will let slide.”

(from *The School Administrator*, October 2000)

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Take some time to talk to a colleague about what you hold to be true about these ideas, and most particularly about the third point. As you dialogue, think about what you could do to translate all of these good ideas into action.

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Practice “going deeply” into your assumptions and beliefs so that you can really understand them. This is the basis for “transformative learning,” that is, learning at the level of our beliefs and assumptions. All kinds of changes in practice can follow from it. An example of how that can happen is Rosa Smith’s story. (See sidebar.)

The Barriers Are Not What We Think They Are

As a result of all this inquiry, I developed a rubric about the

commitment of instructional leaders to quality professional development (TABLE 2). This rubric is very useful to have when somebody calls me to give a talk. I can ask them to look it over as a way of finding out where they are in terms of making a commitment to high quality professional development. Do they just want to plan a single professional development event? Do they want to build awareness? Are they looking to change instructional practices to benefit student learning? I contend that the latter is where our work starts.

There is one more level that says, “In addition to the other three, I commit to long-term cultural and workplace changes that will support professional collaboration and provide time and other resources for learning.” This is a serious commitment.

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As a way of gaining some clarity about what you ask of others and what others ask of you, think about the kind of difference you want to make. If you've decided you really don't care if you make much of a difference, then you will be on the left side of the rubric. If, on the other hand, you want to make a real difference, then you are going to move along toward the third and fourth columns.

I then devised a similar rubric for participants. (TABLE 3) We've all known people who say, "I don't have any desire to change, I'm attending this workshop because I'm supposed to be here." Or "I expect to learn little of value here. If you motivate me, I may acquire some knowledge or skill but I have little commitment to change my professional habits." I would

contend that the vast majority of staff development takes place in those two areas. The level of commitment increases as you move to the right on the rubric: "I hold high expectations for this professional learning experience. I have clear goals and am committed to using what I learn in my work for the benefit of students." And finally, the kind of group we would always like to work with: "I hold high expectations and am willing to step outside my comfort zone to collaborate with peers, to share my work with others for the purpose of improving teaching, to network with others about best practices, and to meet regularly with peers to study teaching and learning."

Presenting this rubric is a way of engaging people in some reflection about their purpose, about what their intention is. My

assumption is that when people are located toward the left side of both rubrics, not much meaningful professional development is happening.

The Creative Potential of Educators

David Levy, who is an inventor, said, "Never dismiss a problem because it seems impossible to solve. Make the bold assumption that anything and everything will one day be better. Your job as an inventor is to make it so." This is a point of view that is really important to what I'm saying to you today—the power of creation and invention to make a better a world is yours. That, I believe, is the nature of your work—you are inventors. Teachers, principals, district administrators, and staff developers are all inventors. And your inventions are really

interesting and really important because you are dealing with big problems and big issues and you have less than adequate resources to do your work. Anybody can be inventive in dealing with small problems and having lots of resources. It is much more exciting when you have less than what you need to do the job, and you have very large goals. That's when invention becomes really important. And it is critical in creating better professional learning.

TABLE 2. Commitment of Instructional Leaders to Professional Learning

<p>I am trying to plan events with the best speakers I can find. I hope that participants enjoy the experience.</p>	<p>I intend to raise awareness of an issue; I do not expect many teachers or administrators to change what they do in ways that benefit students because of this experience.</p>	<p>I expect all participants to change their practice in ways that benefit student learning. Therefore, I commit substantial resources to continuous learning and ongoing coaching, demonstration lessons, hands-on applications, and focused support for teachers and administrators.</p>	<p>I expect all teachers to change their practice and for these changes to be sustained over time to improve the learning of all students. Therefore, in addition to the above, I commit to long-term cultural and workplace changes that will support professional collaboration and provide these and other resources for learning.</p>
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The act of creation, by definition, is dealing with the principal of uncertainty. Peter Senge says, “Most situations in life don’t have a single right answer. In my experience, the most effective actions arise when we live the question, ‘What do we want to create?’ The key to all this is pretty simple—believing that every person has the capacity to create.” This is a profound assumption—that *everyone* has the ability to create.

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Talk to a colleague or a group of peers about what your assumptions are, related to what Peter Senge has said. What do you hold to be true?

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There is an element of this act of creating that is important to keep in the picture, that is, the fact that the act of creation is a joyful one. In his book called *Change the World:*

How Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Results, Robert Quinn says, “Our greatest joy, no matter role, comes from creating. In that process people become aware that they were able to do things that they once thought were impossible. They have empowered themselves which in turn empowers those with whom they interact.”

How do individuals make a profound difference? One of the ways is in how you “show up” in terms of your attitudes about other people’s capacity to create a better world. If you believe that people, individually and collectively, have this capacity within them, you will interact with them differently than if you believe that *you* have the answers to their problems.

When people talk about people’s resistance, I know they are not creating. People who are invented *for* or invented *upon* do a lot of resisting. You cannot resist and

be creative. There is no joy in resistance, and inventors do not resist.

A lot of times we take a good practice that somebody has created and bring it to other people in another place and find that those people are not particularly eager to do it. Then we push harder to get them to do it. Human nature being what it is, people feel manipulated and they push back.

The best things I’ve read about creating were written by Robert Fritz. He describes two structures: oscillating and advancing. In an oscillating structure, you create something that looks like its going to go someplace, but then it just comes back to where it started. The advancing structure goes from one place to another place that is better. Oscillating structures are based on tension resolution. Here is an example: if we feel like we’re overweight, we go on a diet. But

what happens when you don’t eat as much as you are accustomed to? You feel hungry and deprived, so you eat. Then you are overweight. And you keep doing this. With each new diet, you see new hope, and you go through the process again. (See Figure 1.)

One of Fritz’s assumptions is that you cannot problem-solve your way out of an oscillating structure.

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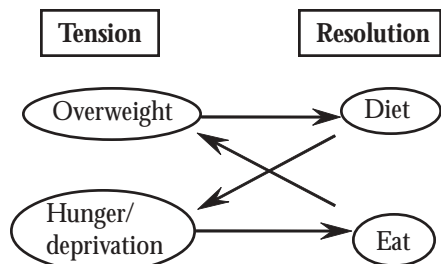
TABLE 3. Commitment of Participants to Professional Development			
I don't have any desire to change. I'm here because I am supposed to be here.	I expect to learn little of value here. If sufficiently motivated by the speaker or activity, I may acquire some knowledge or skill, but I have little commitment to change my professional habits.	I hold high expectations for this professional learning experience. I have clear goals and am committed to using what I learn in my work for the benefit of students.	I hold high expectations and am willing to step outside my comfort zone to collaborate with peers, to share my work with others for the purpose of improving teaching, to network with others about best practices, and to meet regularly with peers to study teaching and learning.

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Figure 1. Oscillating Structure



When you start doing problem-solving behavior, the problem diminishes to some point where it is tolerable and then what do you do? You quit doing the problem-solving behavior, and the problem returns.

But it's not hopeless. The situation can be different, but the difference comes from creating a new structure, which he calls an advancing structure. An advancing structure has three elements: (1) a stretching, morally compelling vision of what you want to create; (2) a thorough, ruthless assessment of current reality; and (3) some really good strategies to get you from where you are to where you want to be.

Unfortunately, we too often avoid doing these things. Who wants to set a goal that is so lofty you can't get there? When you fail, people will say "told you so." Who wants to talk about current reality in a non-complaining way? It's depressing and we feel guilty or defensive.

But I am convinced that goals that are morally compelling and a vision that stretches is the way to get important things done. The

National Staff Development Council has a stretch goal: in five years every school in the country will have quality professional learning for every teacher and every administrator.

Unfortunately, NSDC doesn't have a comprehensive set

of strategies and action plans to get us there. We have to invent them. I'm asking you to join us in finding out how to do this. I believe in our collective capacity to figure it out.

Robert Quinn says that he thinks the kind of changes we're talking about require a social movement, or something equivalent to it. We have the good fortune to be working in a profession where what we do matters a lot. It affects the destiny of millions of people over generations. Our work is important work—it is worthy of a social movement. Dee Hock says "It's no failure to fall short of realizing all that we might dream. The failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize." This is a reminder to us not to dream small because it's less risky.

There are all kinds of things that conventional wisdom dictates can't be done. The conventional wisdom in education has been that particular groups or types of kids can't learn very much. We are part of a process of reinventing that. We are part of doing something that many people think cannot be done—teaching virtually all students to high levels.

There are dragons that you will run into on your journey, but the biggest dragon you will meet is yourself. You will not believe that you can make a difference. It is important to remember that the fundamental thing that people cannot take away from you is your attitude. What would our professional lives be like if we interacted on a regular basis with people who believed we could create a better world for our students?

Speaking for myself, I'm going to be creative, be inventive in the face of doubt and opposition. And I plan on having fun in the process.

Leaders Matter A Lot

Leaders matter a lot for several reasons.

- Leaders can shape the conversation that leads to transformative learning. Rosa Smith shaped the conversation when she was in a meeting. She made sure that what was important to her was going to be talked about. She couldn't guarantee that she would get the results she wanted, but she could guarantee that she would keep bringing it up. She would keep showing up that way because it was important to her.

- Leaders affect fundamental choices and mental models because of the nature of the conversations they lead. They can invite people into dialogue, and when they do that, mental models shift. Usually it is quite slow in the beginning, but over time, things shift. In the meantime, it is really difficult work—to keep showing up with your point of view, to invite others

into dialogue, to not judge, to listen compassionately. It is also a very hard thing to do alone.

- Leaders can perturb the system. They might not be able to control or command, particularly in loosely coupled systems like schools, but they can certainly bring perspectives that create cognitive dissonance.

- Leaders can enable and empower through system design and inventing with others.

- Leaders can create cultures that amplify positive deviance.

An article that I read described the work of *Save the Children* in Vietnam. It said that typically large-scale aid projects do massive infrastructure work in countries. They build highways and sewer systems and spend billions of dollars on things like that.

Save the Children decided to use a very different approach. They went into villages where there were children suffering, and in some cases dying, from malnutrition. But there were also a few children who thrived. All the parents had the same resources.

The researchers labeled the parents whose children thrived as positive deviants. They set up a process by which the village investigated itself. They looked at the variations in children's health and tried to figure out what parenting practices caused parents with similar resources to get better results. They found that there were some parents who were doing unconventional things like using certain roots that were available to everybody but were considered low-

class foods. Another thing they discovered was that when children had diarrhea, the "positive deviant" parents continued to feed them. This was in contrast to the parents whose mental model was why bother feeding them when they have diarrhea?

After they identified these things, they had the "positive deviant" parents teach the other parents, and the kids' health improved dramatically. And then the positive deviant parents began doing new things to make their kids healthier. And they began to be recognized as leaders.

This example made me think of American schools. We have examples of positive deviance at every school, I believe. Here is an assumption of mine: virtually every school in the United States can get a lot better by having the most effective practices in the school spread throughout the school. This can be done without a lot of new information coming in from the outside.



Take a moment to reflect and discuss with a colleague what your assumptions are regarding positive deviance at your site.



Some people may think that if you can't direct or can't control the system, what's the sense in being a leader? In his book, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, Richard Pascal says that you *can* do important work without being directive: "The insight that we cannot direct but only artfully

disturb a living system does not prevent us from taking bold action."

What are some ways to exercise this bold action? As I said earlier, you can change the conversation. You can move people from debate to dialogue. Another thing you can do is to establish a compelling goal, one that draws the organization out of its comfort zone. You can make sure that the right people are involved in the conversation. Pascale says to make sure that nobody is excluded from the conversation who can end what you are doing without putting their fingerprints on it.

A bold leader will insist on uncompromising straight talk to foster relentless discomfort and fuel disequilibrium. Showing up with a clear set of assertions as an invitation to dialogue is one of the best ways that I know to do straight talk. Usually people think of "straight talk" as one person telling another what's wrong with them. Who's not going to get defensive in that situation? But if a leader shows up with a clearly-expressed point of view and really wants to hear the views of others, they can engage in dialogue which may have profound consequences.

Another bold action is to increase discomfort through well-documented facts. This is where the value of data comes into play. A leader can also create a sense of urgency to force people out of their comfort zones.

Yet another approach is to generate and disseminate ideas that lead to breakthroughs in thinking and creativity. When people relate

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to one another in resignation, the whole organization spirals down. When people relate to one another out of a sense of power that comes from creation, it is a completely different kind of relationship.

Individuals Can Make a Difference

The difference individuals can make begins with recognizing that change begins with you. Individuals can:

- *Choose deep change over slow death.* Resignation, depression, and simmering anger are part of slow death.

- *Consider new fundamental choices.* Those are the kinds of choices like Rosa Smith made. She began by shifting her thinking at a very fundamental level.

- *Examine their own mental models and big assumptions.*

- *Believe in people's capacity to create.*

- *Enable and empower through their actions and language.* The words we use when we speak with each other have tremendous power. Use the language of appreciation, celebration, choice, and possibility.

Robert Quinn describes it this way: "The transformational change agent says, 'Here is the standard, which I know is impossible, so let's stand together and learn our way into a higher level of performance.'" A year from now, American schools would be different if every leader interacted with followers in that way instead of, "I know you don't like this standard, but that's the way it is and we have to live with it."

Nelson Mandela says, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of the universe. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We were born to make manifest the glory that is in us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. And when we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

I believe that the people sitting in this room today can profoundly change the quality of professional development in the state of California in five years—if you choose to and invent the way to do it. And according to an African Proverb, "The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The next best time is today."

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