

# Leading effective PD: From abstraction to action

Professional development would be more effective if leaders followed some basic guidelines for organization and presentation.

When school leaders tell you their biggest needs, they're bound to mention helping teachers get better at teaching. In any school, continually improving the teacher's craft is how we improve learning conditions for students. In previous articles, I detailed key strategies for one-on-one teacher development. This month, we'll look into a more familiar type of training: the professional development (PD) workshop. PD workshops are an extraordinarily popular method of facilitating teacher development. But why are they so often ineffective? While most educators can point to PD workshops that were inspiring, engaging, or otherwise memorable, far fewer can list PD that had a great positive effect on how they teach. And when participants can't put what they learn into action, PD simply isn't worthwhile.

So, what characteristics of PD actually change teacher action? First, let's see how to avoid some common errors in planning PD. Then we'll discuss how principal Kelly Dowling applied the guiding principles in this article to her PD on how the Common Core affects reading instruction. Let's start with the errors.

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*Leading Effective Professional Development* (Jossey-Bass, 2012).

## LESSON LEARNED #1:

**Ab ac i e e ead ac i**

Ask me whether your PD is going to change teaching at your school, and the first thing I'll ask you about is your objective. If a PD objective doesn't refer to a concrete action you want teachers to be able to do after the workshop, then the change won't happen — at least not for the entire school. To design great PD objectives, abandon abstraction in favor of action.

This is a strong statement. You might ask: What about topics that can't be translated so easily to action? Diversity, for example. You'd be hard pressed to find an educator who's never had concerns related to diversity in his or her school. But imagine a school leader planning a workshop around this objective: Be aware of the diversity of our school community. What will be the result of this workshop? How will it make your school feel different? Answering that difficult question is the crux of building effective PD. Until you name an outcome, your workshop doesn't have teeth. Do you want teachers treating each other better because of this workshop? Do you want interactions between students and teachers to be stronger? How will this manifest itself in the staff culture? Until you answer those questions, you can't plan PD that matches that outcome.

The abstract goal of establishing greater diversity awareness at

a school is without doubt a worthy one. But, to pursue that goal more effectively, the leader must determine what concrete actions would promote diversity awareness at her specific school and design objectives that match the actions. Here are some suggestions of how to narrow your large abstract goal to a PD objective.

Here are some suggestions for moving from abstraction to action:

- **Abstract:**  
Be aware of the diversity of our students and the experiences that they have had.
- **Still too abstract:**  
Understand the current political and social challenges of our community and how they affect our students.
- **Actionable:**  
Redirect a noncompliant student with one of the three nonbiased strategies presented in the workshop.

Note that aside from being a specific action for teachers to perform, this final PD objective also is observable. When the leader looks in on her teachers' classrooms after the PD, she will be able to see if teachers are using the nonbiased strategies she's taught them. That empowers her to hold teachers accountable for making the change their school needs, and to determine how to further address the issues at hand if teachers aren't following through.



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