There Really Are Differences Between What Leadership Teams Do and What Guiding Coalitions Do

School leadership teams lead everything under the sun. For example, they lead everything from parking lot pothole repair to deciding the location of the new mural of the school's mascot to implementing the new reading program to beginning the process to become a professional learning community. They lead it all.

On the other hand, guiding coalitions have a single purpose and focus. Guiding coalitions lead change.

School leadership teams come in all shapes and sizes. They have many different purposes, and their members serve many roles and perform an infinite number of responsibilities. School leadership teams that lead everything all the time are called many different names. There are leadership teams, administrative teams, school improvement teams, action teams, teacher leadership teams, design teams, executive teams, and so on.

The name of the team that leads your school is not important. However, what that team does is critical. In professional learning communities, nouns are not nearly as essential as verbs.

Table 1.1 compares traditional school leadership teams with guiding coalitions.

Table 1.1

	Leadership Team	**Guiding Coalition**
Responsibilities	This team is responsible for leading multiple areas of the school, such as facilities, student discipline, school improvement, community relations, the PLC initiative or processes, and so on.	This team is singularly responsible for leading PLC processes at the school. It does not lead any competing initiatives at the school.
Member selection	Team members are selected (or volunteer) using criteria such as their longevity in their position, their specific knowledge or experience in multiple school-related topics, and their need or willingness to gain school-level leadership experiences. They might be handpicked by the principal, or they might gain membership, regardless of whether they meet any of the aforementioned criteria, if they are the only people available.	Team members might be selected using stricter criteria based on leadership, position power, expertise, reputation, relationships, and credibility (Kotter, 1999). Members may be voted onto the team by peers, handpicked by the principal, selected through an application process, and so on.
Focus	Team members may assist and support the principal in making decisions about multiple areas and topics. The team may have limited responsibility to focus on a narrow aspect of the school (such as current issues facing the school, public relations, communications, celebrations, staff morale, and so on).	Team members spend their entire meeting time on leading the PLC. The team primarily focuses on student learning, a collaborative culture, and results.
Decision-making authority	Team members may advise the principal or give their opinions and thoughts about issues and concerns, but they may not be formally involved in the actual decision-making process. Administrative personnel may be the only members of the team for confidentiality, personnel, and discipline purposes. Other aspects of the school might be led by ad hoc committees or department or grade-level teams.	Team members serve to advise and support the principal and share as equals in the decision-making process. The team usually has members who share high levels of trust, share a common goal, and are considered opinion leaders who are so respected that others will likely follow their lead.
Organizational structure	The team may have a leadership hierarchy where administrators have more of a boss relationship with	The team has a flat organizational structure. There is no position of power.

		All team members sit as equals on the guiding coalition. The motto of this team might be, "We will model the way for how all teams will operate."
Decision-making options	The team may make decisions in several ways: decide and announce, seek input from a sampling of team members and then decide, seek input from the entire team and then decide, reach consensus, or delegate the decision with criteria or constraints (Interaction Associates, n.d.).	The team makes decisions preferably by consensus notwithstanding unusual circumstances. When they cannot reach consensus in a timely manner, the principal has the fallback decision-making option to gather input from the team and decide (Interaction Associates, n.d.).

Source: Hall, 2021

Mike Mattos, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas W. Many (2016) define a guiding coalition as:

An alliance of key members of an organization who are specifically charged with leading a change process through predictable turmoil. Members of the coalition should include opinion leaders—people who are so respected within the organization that others are likely to follow their lead. (p. 21)

The guiding coalition is the lead team or model collaborative team in a professional learning community. It is the center of a school's leadership universe from which all aspects of school-based leadership radiate. In a professional learning community, all collaborative team members assume leadership responsibilities, but it is the guiding coalition's responsibility to set the tone for the collaborative work done throughout the school.

Guiding coalitions in PLCs are tasked with achieving the following goals:
• Become PLC experts by learning about the PLC process—from common vocabulary to the cycle of continuous improvement in which collaborative teacher teams participate.
• Become experts on the PLC process's benefits for students, teachers, and the school community.
• Disseminate information about the PLC process to collaborative teacher teams.
• Lead PLC transformation by example; maintain a laser-like concentration on improving student learning, focusing on results, and working collaboratively.
• Model continuous improvement.
• Design job-embedded learning opportunities.
• Support collaborative teacher teams. (Hall, pp. 44-45)
Schools that are led by a traditional leadership team that leads every aspect of the school may wish to consider re-inventing themselves in order to take on the transformational work of becoming a professional learning community. This change might be made in one of several ways.

Principals may wish to create a new guiding coalition that has a single purpose – to lead the school in becoming a professional learning community. Agendas for this new guiding coalition would focus exclusively on PLC products and processes. This guiding coalition would lead no competing initiatives or processes. All remaining leadership duties and responsibilities would be handled by a smaller administrative leadership team.

A second option for principals might be to put additional instructional personnel on the existing leadership team to ensure all personnel have a representative on the team. Depending on the

size of the school, this newly transformed team might begin to lead the PLC processes leaving all other administrative duties and responsibilities to an administrative team.

In smaller schools, such reorganization may not be possible. In these cases, the existing leadership team might bring on instructional personnel to ensure all personnel on staff are represented. Agendas would have two areas of focus. One section of the agendas would deal with the day-to-day operation of the school, the nuts and bolts. Here's where leadership team responsibilities such as the parking lot repairs, the commons area discipline, and the reading program implementation would be discussed and handled. The second part of the agenda would deal exclusively with leading the PLC process. Nothing else would be allowed to creep into this part of the agenda because it centers on the guiding coalition responsibilities of leading change. School leaders should never attempt to place PLC topics as item number 14 on an agenda of 27 items. If they do, the PLC initiative will eventually lose its momentum; and the PLC journey will be short-lived.

Effective PLC leaders do not allow implementation of PLC concepts and processes to get lost in the noise of mandates, initiatives, and administration. One of the best solutions to keep this from happening is to lead the change through the guiding coalition.