The power of **beliefs and assumptions**

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

We can articulate our beliefs and assumptions about the central office's role in professional learning and student success.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NO OPINION   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

We can articulate the values and principles that define who we are as an organization and the work we do together.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NO OPINION   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

We identify learning as the core of our work.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NO OPINION   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

We examine our assumptions before executing a new plan of action.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NO OPINION   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGRE

We ensure that any changes are consistent with our core values.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NO OPINION   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

Every school district is responsible for creating schools that ensure all students receive an excellent education. This statement is a key assumption underlying the work of becoming a learning system.

A second, perhaps more controversial statement, is: Creating schools that ensure an excellent education for all students requires transformation.

District leadership teams seldom are organized in a way that produces consistently high-performing schools across the district. Too few school districts leverage learning to produce that outcome. To achieve improved outcomes, school districts need to transform their central offices.

While most readers likely agree that the central office is fundamentally responsible for creating a system of good schools, some may disagree that the central office must be transformed. They believe that their central office staffs already operate with structures and strategies to produce great schools. A few may think it is not the

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central office's responsibility to produce great schools. Others may believe it is fundamentally impossible to have every school in a district be a great school.

In a learning system, leaders recognize the need to discuss these underlying beliefs and assumptions in order to promote change. For deep change to occur, those engaged in change must understand the existing, unspoken beliefs and assumptions that may help or hinder transformation.

To transform a district into a learning system is hard work. The first piece of that work is clearly identifying beliefs and assumptions that exist within the staff, examining contradictions that may impede change, and confronting the challenge of transformation.

Identify beliefs and assumptions

Acquiring new behaviors requires understanding and examining the beliefs and assumptions that drive new actions. Others term these ideas *core values* (beliefs) and *principles* (assumptions).

"Without understanding the principles of a given task," says Stephen Covey (1990), "people become incapacitated when the situation changes and different practices are required to be successful. . . . When we teach practices without principles, we tend to make people dependent on us or others" (p. 25).

Beliefs are what we hold to be true. They endure over time. They drive what we say, think,

> and do. Our words and actions convey how deeply held our beliefs are. What we say, think, and do are symbolic indicators to others who share our beliefs. Beliefs can be the source of deep conflict and strong alliances among people (Hirsh & Killion, 2007).

> Assumptions are the logic behind our beliefs and signal the reasons for those beliefs. Assumptions guide how we behave, what we plan, and what we execute. They provide the rationale for our intended outcomes, our best-laid plans, and our expectations for success. Assumptions are deemed accurate when we achieve our intended outcomes; they are questioned when results differ from expectations. Assumptions are the basis for our beliefs, behaviors, theories of action, and change strategy.

"Transformational learning is based on the view that an individual's beliefs influence his or

her actions in powerful ways that may or may not be evident to the person," Dennis Sparks writes. "While an educator's belief system may be called by different names—mental model, paradigm, worldview—that belief system exerts considerable influence on teaching and leadership" (2003, p. 29).

Many educational change initiatives fail because leaders focus too much on actions and not enough on their underlying assumptions. New behaviors often are not sustained over time because people's beliefs have not been transformed, and the principles and assumptions needed to sustain the effort are not deeply embedded in the individuals and organization.

In *Good to Great,* Jim Collins recommends that businesses preserve a set of core values while stimulating progress and change. "Enduring, great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world," he writes. "There is the magical combination of 'preserve the core and stimulate progress'" (2001, p. 195). Core beliefs keep the organization grounded even amid rapid change.

"What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create," state Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker. "Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school" (1998, p. 25).

Becoming a Learning System is based on numerous assumptions, the most foundational of which is that learning is essential to change and change is essential to improvement. Several beliefs and assumptions about high-achieving school districts guide this book:

- Every school district is responsible for creating schools that ensure all students receive an excellent education.
- Creating schools that ensure an excellent education for all students requires transformation.
- Becoming a learning system requires that all school staff commit to continuous improvement and ongoing learning.
- Central office staff ensure that every school and teacher performs at a high level.
- Leaders of high-performing learning systems set and reinforce expectations through their thoughts, actions, and the ways they engage others in learning.
- Leaders recognize learning as central to all change and improvement efforts.
- Leaders of high-performing learning systems assume responsibility for their own learning, model that commitment, and develop a sense of collective responsibility for others' learning throughout the organization.
- When educators continuously learn, students achieve more.
- Learning Forward's definition of professional learning and Standards for Professional Learning are essential components of a high-performing learning system, and educators must understand and know how to apply them.

Every great accomplishment is undergirded by its architects' set of beliefs and assumptions about their vision and their process for achieving it. These underlying beliefs and assumptions affect outcomes for the educators and students within school districts.

Beliefs and principles influence our decisions and guide us in solving problems. They are touchstones that we return to when we face conflict, dilemmas, or challenges. They set a common foundation that members of a community share.

Members of the community also are challenged to uphold and protect the principles because these beliefs and assumptions shape what the community stands for. Developing that common understanding is essential to transformation. The first step toward creating a common foundation is examining existing contradictions.

Examine the contradictions

Regularly discussing our beliefs and assumptions opens up deeper understanding of ourselves and our colleagues. Examining our beliefs and assumptions allows us to test our theories, weigh our comfort levels, openly discuss our concerns, and change our plans. It promotes understanding of different points of view—often grounded in very different experiences—and as a result may increase empathy, respect, and collegiality. Examining and discussing our beliefs and assumptions may explain the reasons behind something that puzzled us.

People sometimes say they believe one thing and yet behave in a way that is incongruent with

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that stated belief. A disconnect appears between their espoused beliefs and their behaviors. These instances are not hard to identify. For example, some people say they believe in the value of exercise and commit to friends and family to exercise five times a week. Then they offer many reasons why they are not successfully meeting

their commitment. Their explanations represent the disconnect between an espoused belief and commitment to action. When they recognize this disconnect, they may be more open to examining their beliefs and reevaluating their actions.

We see similar disconnect in our schools. When a principal says she supports parental involvement in her school (espoused principle) and yet creates a complicated system for registering parent volunteers (principle in action), her espoused principle and her principle in action contradict one another. It may be difficult for her to see this contradiction, yet it is relatively easy for others to spot (Hirsh & Killion, 2007). Figure 1.1 examines the differences between what is said, what is evident, and what others see.

Margaret Wheatley writes that, "as humans, we often contradict ourselves—we say one thing and do another. We state who we are, but then act contrary to that. We say we're open-minded, but then judge someone for their appearance. We say we're a team, but then gossip about a colleague" (2009, p. 22).

We experience dissonance if we act and speak in a way that is incongruent with our beliefs and assumptions. Learning system leaders believe that all schools must be great schools with great leaders; however, in some cases, they do not see this happening. Acknowledging the disconnect may lead them to examine existing beliefs and actions and determine what changes are needed in order to behave in a way consistent with their beliefs.

As Stephanie Hirsh and Joellen Killion write, "When practices change without deep exploration of the principles that guide them, people will be pulled back to their old ways" (2007, p. 21).

Figure 1.1 Principles and evidence

ESPOUSED PRINCIPLES (What is said)	PRINCIPLES IN ACTION (What is evident)	EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE (What others see)
Training without follow-up is malpractice.	Educators are held accountable for implementing practices that they learned in training without support or assistance.	Limited or no follow-up opportunities are embedded into professional learning designs.
Professional learning is integral to school improvement.	Professional development workshops are planned and delivered in isolation from school improvement planning and goal setting.	Professional development occurs sporadically throughout the school year or outside the contract day.
Teachers are professionals.	Teachers are technicians, carefully implementing programs of prescriptive curriculum.	Professional development trains all teachers to implement prescriptive behavior with limited variation.
Effective professional learning is measured in terms of its effect on student learning.	Seat time, not application of learning, is rewarded.	States and local school districts have policies that recognize or reward participation based on hours attended rather than evidence of learning.
Professional learning respects and adheres to principles of adult learning.	All adults are expected to comply with the same professional development requirements.	Educators experience one-size-fits-all learning.

Honest, constructive feedback can help us recognize dissonance and ultimately transform our beliefs, principles, and practices. When we examine our espoused principles and align them with our principles in action, we resolve discrepancies and are able to function at a higher level—the level of transformational change.

Confront the challenges of transformational change

Lasting change requires more than a quick fix. Transforming practice requires transforming learning. For professional learning to refine and improve professional practice so that educators affect student achievement, individuals'

underlying principles must be consistent with their purposes.

Working to establish and clarify a common set of beliefs and assumptions guides system transformation and leads to success. The process takes time and dialogue, because members of the organization bring their own sets of beliefs based on their experiences.

While it is easiest to work with colleagues who share our beliefs and assumptions, it is also valuable to work with those who offer other beliefs and assumptions. By analyzing and discussing

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different views, leaders can design an action plan based on a common set of assumptions to which everyone can commit.

Covey suggests that when we think about change, even if the desire for change is generated from within, "we usually think in terms of learning new skills rather than showing more integrity to basic principles. But significant breakthroughs often represent internal breaks with traditional ways of thinking" (1992, pp. 17-18).

According to Wheatley, we must be willing to have others challenge our beliefs and ideas and to be curious about what others believe. She identifies the essence of transformation as a willingness to allow ourselves to undertake the difficult work of being challenged.

"As we work together to restore hope to the future, we need to include a new and strange ally—our willingness to be disturbed," she writes. "No one person or perspective can give us the answers we need to the problems of today. Paradoxically, we can only find those answers by admitting we don't know. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time" (2009, p. 38).

Working to clarify underlying beliefs and assumptions can be difficult but ultimately contributes to vision, inspiration, and accountability.

Reflection
questions

- What purpose does declaring beliefs and assumptions serve in ensuring our central office achieves its mission?

- How necessary for transformation is it for us to examine our beliefs and assumptions?

- How is transformation different from continuous improvement? What beliefs and assumptions distinguish each?

- How does Jim Collins' combination of "preserve the core and stimulate progress" (2001, p. 195) manifest itself in our work?

- What contradictions can we identify between our "espoused principles" and "principles in action?"

- How would we define for others the terms *beliefs*, *principles*, and *assumptions*?

RESOURCES

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TOOLS INDEX

TOOL	TITLE	PURPOSE
1.1	Examining beliefs and assumptions	Begin a conversation to clarify beliefs and assumptions about professional learning and change.
1.2	Uncovering assumptions	Identify and write assumptions that undergird individuals' beliefs and actions.
1.3	Clarifying beliefs and assumptions in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning	Consider the underlying beliefs and assumptions regarding change associated with the Standards for Professional Learning.
1.4	Writing beliefs and assumptions	Clarify a district's or school's principles about professional learning or other topics.
1.5	Writing a teachable point of view	Write a teachable point of view that helps individuals uncover their beliefs and assumptions.
1.6	Article: Navigation	Assist district leaders in looking at data through new lenses.