
6 Leaders at All Levels

It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization, a Ford or a Gates. It's just not possible any longer to figure it out from the top, and have everyone else following the order of the "grand strategist." The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization.

—Peter Senge (2006)

In [Chapter 1](#), we began by asking why very few well-funded school districts have been able to close racial and socioeconomic student achievement gaps. After discussing possible reasons, we stated that the typical K–12 organization, as it is currently designed, has reached the limits of its capacity and needs to be changed to ensure more students achieve at high levels. We can no longer assume that asking educators to work harder, or simply adding some new published program, will significantly increase the quality of teaching and learning in a school system. We believe that in order to raise achievement for all students, schools must be transformed from cultures of teacher autonomy, isolation, and overstandardization, with little professional development, into learning organizations.

In [Chapters 3](#) through [5](#), we proposed three high-leverage drivers that will enhance teaching and learning and enable educators to break the historical limitations that have held back school capacity. The three drivers are: trust, collaboration in all directions, and capacity building. Since these drivers are attributes of a learning organization, they can only be implemented by a wide array of educators who are committed to a capacity-building culture based on trust and collaboration. In this chapter, we will focus on the fourth driver, leadership at all levels. We will discuss the qualities of school leaders who energize others to expand the school's capacity to educate all students at higher levels. In a K–12 learning organization, the definition of school leader is expanded to include both traditional school leaders and teacher-leaders who take charge and improve learning for themselves and others every day.

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The study of leadership is a huge topic, including management, planning, and finance, most of which lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, we focus our attention on one aspect of leadership—the skill set of school leaders in K–12 learning organizations. These leaders are *learning leaders* who promote trust, collaboration, and capacity building, and who build leadership capacity by supporting existing leaders and nurturing new ones throughout the school or school system.

In the sections that follow we describe six skill sets of learning leaders. They are leaders who

1. act on their core values;
2. inspire confidence;
3. build an inclusive network;
4. build a positive school culture;

5. demonstrate sincere inquiry; and
6. support risk taking.

Acts on Core Values

Core values are the fundamental principles that guide an organization's conduct. A school system's core values define what the system stands for and how educators should act every day. When school leaders act every day in a manner that is consistent with their school's core values, they affect their schools far beyond annual goals and strategic plans. When the leader's daily behavior matches his or her espoused values, faculty members are far more likely to believe in the leader and follow the school's goals with enthusiasm.

While it is not unusual for districts to have core values listed in their official publications, it is less common that these values are utilized to drive decisions about student conduct or instruction. When school leaders draw on core values of safety and respect to determine the best approach to a student disciplinary matter, they increase the likelihood that an opportunity for learning and growth will emerge from the incident. Consistent values enable learning school systems to stay on course when battered by a multitude of challenging problems, both internal and external.

When leaders act based on a set of consistent values, they bring authenticity to their work. And while not everyone will agree with every decision, over time members of the community will develop respect for the authentic leader. Without clear, consistent core values and leaders who strongly commit to them, a school or school system may be pulled away from its mission by community pressure or internal politics.

Inspires Confidence

When a doctor, lawyer, or a principal makes a recommendation, why do most people follow the advice? Even though few people are experts in any given field, most people will follow the advice when they have confidence in the person giving the advice. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who has written extensively about leaders of Fortune 100 companies and managers of sports teams, defines confidence as "positive expectations for favorable outcomes" (2004, p. 7). Just as with medical and legal advice, confidence influences a person's willingness to follow advice from school leaders.

In [Chapter 1](#) we discussed the adverse impact on student learning that can result if teachers hold a limiting view on student intelligence. When teachers believe that certain students cannot learn, or learn as well as others, the teachers' lack of confidence in their students will probably result in lower student effort and performance. In contrast, when educators hold a more liberating view about student capacity, or growth mindset, and believe in their students' abilities to learn at much higher levels, students will gain confidence in themselves, work harder, and learn more.

We believe in the power of positive growth mindsets, and that they are important for all administrators. For example, if principals genuinely believe in their teachers, the teachers are likely to engage in reform activities with commitment. However, if principals do not have confidence in their teachers, the teachers will probably comply with the requests, but are unlikely to put in extra effort to ensure success.

Sustained confidence in a leader is based on long-term success. In a school, a sport team, or any organization, people develop confidence in leaders whom they trust and who demonstrate that following their leadership will yield success. When confidence is built on real success, people feel energized and valued, which leads to more hard work and more success. When schools or companies are successful, they attract talented applicants who want to be part of the winning team, which then builds even more organizational capacity and more success. Conversely, when schools or organizations are failing, workers mistrust their leaders, feel abandoned, and may lose faith that their hard work will make any difference. This lack of confidence may also affect the school or organization's ability to hire talented workers, which may further reduce the school or organization's effectiveness.

We urge school leaders of all schools, whether successful or not, to come to work each day with positive expectations, to show sincere appreciation for hard work, and to acknowledge the learning accomplishments (even small ones) of the staff. Planning for and creating small wins builds confidence that hard work will produce results over time (Kotter, 1996). We expect these behaviors of our teachers toward their students. Leaders who model these behaviors not only support their staff members but also illustrate the expectations that best serve students. Additionally, everyone likes to be recognized and validated for what he or she has accomplished, and positive feelings are contagious. Change often begins with the heart.

Builds an Inclusive Network

In a learning organization, good ideas can come from anywhere. Therefore, it is vital that in a learning school system, school leaders establish inclusive networks of professionals within each school, between the schools, with the central office, and with the outside world. When the leader is connected with a wide array of people, then promising, creative ideas are more likely to get the leader's attention and to be supported. If teachers feel connected to and supported by their leaders, they will be more likely to experiment and try new educational approaches, increasing the creativity and innovation of the school.

Inclusive networks not only help increase educator creativity, they also help build relationships and foster trust between educators, and are vital to the school leaders' ability to make sound, thoughtful educational decisions. It is important that leaders include as many people as they can in key decisions, including people who disagree with them or who may offer pushback. Leaders who reach out in this way, solicit honest feedback, and demonstrate authentic and respectful listening skills are more likely to maintain the trust and support of their teachers and to arrive at better solutions to complex educational problems.

In many ailing school cultures, certain members of the staff are seen as "enemies" or not worthy of attention because of their critical views. Certain members of the school community may become marginalized and even oppose the district's mission. Ironically, the marginalized members of the community may be aware of reasons that the leader's ideas will not work, or work effectively, but their voices are not being heard. For this reason, it is critically important for leaders to understand all perspectives, including ones that might be critical of the current direction of the system.

Builds a Positive School Culture

Haim Ginott, a teacher, child psychologist, and author of the book, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*, writes:

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I have tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a child humanized or dehumanized. (1976, p. 13)

This quote eloquently captures the power and potential that educators have to create a climate or culture within their classrooms—a climate that affects children in much the same way that a sunny day can brighten our outlook or a storm can scare us. Parents of school-age children understand this notion intuitively. They attend an open house, converse with a teacher, and listen carefully to the comments of other parents. These experiences provide an impression of the kind of atmosphere to which their children are exposed within a classroom. How a teacher responds to mistakes, the tone of voice employed when engaging students, and the approach used in communicating expectations are indicators of climate established within a particular teacher's domain.

While a great deal has been written about the strategies that teachers can utilize to craft a responsive and thriving climate or classroom culture, most practitioners know less about the ways this climate can be established by educational leaders within their spheres of influence. Yet developing a vibrant and thriving work climate is an important responsibility of leadership and an essential factor in a learning school system. A school is a system and part of a larger school system. The learning environment in a particular classroom is often influenced by the more encompassing climate or culture that has been established within a department, a school, or even an entire district.

John D'Auria and Matt King have altered the original Ginott quote to describe this aspect of leadership:

We've come to the conclusion that a leader is the decisive element in the school community. It is the personal approach of that leader which creates the climate. It's the emotional responses of the leader that make the weather. The leader has tremendous power to make the life of teachers and students miserable or joyous. The leader can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. He or she can humiliate or honor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is the reactions of the leader that decide whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a community strengthened or diminished. (D'Auria, 2010, p. 8)

One of the most important lessons that we have learned as educators is that a leader's effectiveness is dependent upon his or her ability to create an atmosphere that brings out the best in people and encourages team members to continually improve. Roland Barth writes,

Unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of a school, all "innovations," high standards, and high-stakes tests will have to fit in and around existing elements of the culture. They will remain superficial window dressing incapable of making much of a difference. (2002, p. 6)

A major responsibility of school leaders is to nurture and strengthen a school's culture in order to more effectively meet the needs of the children. A school's culture is the lynchpin that connects all the other essential components we have described earlier: developing trust, encouraging collaboration, and building the capacity of the staff. Effective leaders unleash the power of these community-building forces by positively shaping the culture where people work.

Demonstrates Sincere Inquiry

In order to activate power of inquiry, leaders must be skilled in the art of difficult conversations, and must be able to do what former Harvard professor Chris Argyris describes as "combining advocacy with inquiry" (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). Too often, leaders find themselves defending their positions against critics, rather than inquiring about how others interpret a problem and its solution. When leaders do not balance their advocacy for ideas with curiosity for how others view the issue, learning is inhibited.

One of the authors first learned about combining advocacy and inquiry at the 2002 annual conference of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) in Boston. At one conference session, the speaker, Dennis Sparks, who was then the NSDC's executive director, began the session by talking about why leaders must be willing to first share their ideas with faculty members, and then ask them to debate or challenge the ideas. He described three typical approaches used by leaders, and why the third scenario would likely produce the best decisions, faculty learning, and faculty commitment.

1. The leader advocates for his or her ideas, but does not invite feedback—In the first scenario, the leader starts the meeting, tells the faculty members his or her view on a new initiative, and *does not* invite comment. A variation of this approach occurs when the leader asks for comments, and faculty members know, based on experience, they are not safe to debate the leader's ideas. In this situation,

there is no real exchange of ideas, no possible way to improve the leader's initiative, and little or no learning.

2. The leader does not advocate for his or her ideas, and asks faculty members what to do—In the second scenario, the leader starts the meeting by stating a problem, asks the faculty members what they think about the given topic, and never presents his or her ideas. In this type of meeting, faculty members are left wondering what the leader thinks (for example, that he or she lacks courage to share ideas, is withholding ideas, or may not know what to do). This approach may diminish faculty member confidence and trust in the school leader.

3. The leader both advocates for his or her ideas and authentically seeks out feedback—In the third scenario, the leader starts the meeting by letting the faculty members know that he or she *really* wants their input and wants them to discuss and debate the ideas presented. The leader tells them that he or she will first share his or her ideas and then will provide time for faculty members to discuss and debate the ideas. In this example, or a variation that includes both genuine advocacy and inquiry, the administrator (or teacher-leader) shows leadership by putting forward his or his ideas, shows openness by allowing the ideas to be discussed and challenged (which builds trust), and shows respect for the faculty members' views by careful listening. This process of advocacy and inquiry permits everyone to engage in meaningful dialogue and build on the leader's ideas or even to reject the ideas. Curiosity about the perspectives of others helps build positive and productive relationships. Genuine inquiry communicates esteem for the thinking of others. Most importantly, inquiry produces new perspectives and knowledge.

Some may argue that the second scenario is the only way to provide an authentic grassroots development of ideas. We believe that with the crowded agendas found in most schools today, when the leader provides a prompt or starting point for thinking and authentically invites others to revise, adapt, or add on to those ideas and seeks out alternative perspectives, it creates an efficient way to build collaboration and manage the scarcity of time.

Supports Risk Taking

In order to break through the current limitations of schools, the educators need to promote a constant flow of new ideas and inventive thinking. Effective school leaders in a learning organization must encourage and validate creative problem solving and support educators who try out new ideas and take risks. Existing problems cannot be solved without new ideas. It is unrealistic to expect that many teachers will analyze current school or classroom practices and recommend new approaches without support from school leaders. Educators who receive support and encouragement are more likely to analyze student performance data and current educational practices and take risks to improve the quality of teaching and learning for students. Schools must also become laboratories for new knowledge. Teachers need to use their classrooms as laboratories to examine student learning and to develop more effective interventions. According to Hattie,

School leaders and teachers need to create schools, staffrooms, and classroom environments in which error is welcomed as a learning opportunity, in which discarding incorrect knowledge and understanding is welcomed, and in which teachers can feel safe to learn, re-learn, and explore knowledge and understanding. (2012, p. 9)

Currently, schools are highly dependent on research conducted at universities, and school leaders are often hesitant to implement new educational practices that do not yet have validation from studies conducted at universities and other research institutions. While research conducted at universities and other institutions may be statistically reliable, these studies take many years to accomplish and require large sample sizes. Additionally, these research studies may not be narrowly tailored to the needs of an individual school or school district. Consequently, we encourage school leaders to use their own schools and school districts as minilaboratories to determine which practices will work best for their students;

the combination of university research with practitioner insights will create the richest and most robust range of solutions to the school or district's educational challenges.

We will now shift our discussion from the qualities of effective leaders in a learning organization to a discussion of why schools need leaders at every level, how to create them, and how to support all leaders, current and new.

BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING LEADERS EVERYWHERE— CENTRAL OFFICE, PRINCIPALS, DEPARTMENT HEADS, AND TEACHERS

In the traditional school system, there are central office leaders such as superintendents and district administrators, middle management leaders such as principals and department heads, and some teacher-leaders. Teacher-leaders may serve as mentors to other teachers or as members of a curriculum committee. In these school systems, classroom teachers are not considered part of the leadership structure, and leadership is often top down. In a K–12 learning organization, however, all faculty members and support staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles, either formally in a part-time position beyond their regular duties or informally, without a title, on an as-needed basis with peer colleagues.

Peter Senge, who was the founding chair of MIT's Society for Organizational Learning, advocates that learning organizations support leadership at every level of an organization—by officially appointed leaders and those who act as leaders, regardless of their title (1996). Senge, who has intensively studied both corporations and public schools, argues that we should abandon the notion that only top management can cause significant change. Organizations need leaders everywhere to invent new ways of improving performance and advocating for changes that are needed. Kouzes and Posner, who served as professors of leadership at Santa Clara University, reached the same conclusion:

In the thousands of cases we've studied, we've yet to encounter a single example of extraordinary achievement that did not involve the active participation and support of many people. We've yet to find a single instance in which one talented person—leader or individual contributor—accounted for most, let alone 100 percent, of the success. Throughout the years, leaders from all professions, from all economic sectors, and from all around the globe continue to tell us, "You can't do it alone." Leadership is not a solo act; it's a team performance....The winning strategies will be based upon the "we" not "I" philosophy. Collaboration is a social imperative. Without it people can't get extraordinary things done in organizations. (2003, p. 22)

A second major problem with a traditional framework for leadership is compliance. According to Senge, "When genuine commitment is needed, hierarchical authority becomes problematic....No one can force another person to learn if the learning involves deep changes in beliefs and attitudes and fundamental new ways of thinking and acting" (1996, p. 64). In a learning organization, everyone can contribute and advocate change. Everyone can provide leadership within his or her work group to implement the new plan.

In [Chapter 8](#), we will discuss how great ideas can diffuse from a few individuals to an entire school system. We will discuss how the diffusion of new ideas, programs, and innovations requires local leaders (teachers and middle managers) who will advocate change, and executive leaders who have the authority and resources to support significant change throughout a school or school system.

DEVELOPING NEW LEADERS

According to a study conducted by the National Association of Secondary Principals, a dedicated and dynamic principal is a key attribute of a high performing school (2004, June 9). Unfortunately, the Wallace Foundation reported that while "there are plenty of 'certified' applicants...there seems to be a dearth of candidates with high-level leadership skills....Superintendents continue to express

dissatisfaction about adequate leadership of new principals.” (Roza, 2003). Additionally, in 2006 the Pennsylvania Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals published a study of nine states from Pennsylvania to Maine that found that over 42% of principals and assistant principals said that they will retire from their positions within the next five years.

In our judgment, based on decades of hiring principals, there is a principal shortage in the United States that must be addressed. Losing a principal or any school leader can have a major impact on a school. When an effective principal or other school leader retires or resigns, he or she leaves behind years of working relationships with colleagues and district knowledge. The new hire, no matter how competent, will need to establish relationships with numerous educators, students, and parents; to build trust; to learn about programs; and to gain a deep understanding of school and community values. When a school leader retires or resigns, forward momentum on current initiatives may be temporarily slowed or be lost permanently.

In 2009, McKinsey and Company published a study of 20 systems and 200 system leaders from all over the world to determine the factors that contributed to their students’ success. The researchers found that one of the major factors related to high student performance was *continuity of the system’s leadership*. This report went on to emphasize the importance of generating a system of leadership from within the district in order to ensure “that there is a continuity of purpose and vision in sustaining the system’s pedagogy and improvement” (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010, p. 22).

Given that hiring an outstanding principal is difficult and the change in personnel may affect a school’s capacity to function at a high level, we recommend that school districts implement a plan to develop new leaders. By nurturing new and talented leaders from within the district, not only can a school system expand the pool of quality applicants for future jobs; in addition, the newly trained leaders may be more likely to stay in the district and become part of the team finding new educational solutions.

In order to build future leadership capacity, we recommend that school systems offer leadership courses and experiences as part of the district’s professional development program. Ideally, the program should be designed for the three types of school leaders: current administrators, future school administrators, and teachers who want to become teacher-leaders without leaving the classroom. The first two programs would need to be adaptable based on what skills or knowledge are pertinent for current leaders or required for licensure. For example, current leaders may need to expand their supervision and evaluation skills or take a course on how to have difficult conversations with supervisees. Educators seeking an administrator license may need to work in the district to complete an internship. The third program, for teacher-leaders, is a relatively new concept in public schools today. In 2011, the National Education Association, 19 national organizations, 11 state agencies, and 8 institutions of higher education published teacher-leader model standards.¹ According to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, teacher-leaders are defined as teachers who, “working with principals, are instructional and organizational change agents who have a critical impact on school, teacher, and student success” (2012).

We see the same six leadership qualities that we discussed at the beginning of the chapter exhibited by the teacher-leaders. Teacher-leaders, department leaders, principal leaders, and central administration leaders all act on their core values, inspire confidence, build an inclusive network, build a positive culture, demonstrate sincere inquiry, and support risk taking. These are the same six skills that promote a culture of trust, collaboration, and capacity building in the classroom to the school board room.

In a learning organization, everyone can find his or her passion to improve student learning. Some educators will choose formal leadership positions, while others may choose to lead their teacher team or lead a district committee. Expanding leadership development is one way that districts can expand their capacity to bring teams of educators together to solve complex educational problems.

LEADERSHIP THAT CONNECTS THE HEART AND MIND

While much has been written about the important skills that educational leaders need to be effective instructional leaders, excellent managers, and skillful communicators, there have been far fewer descriptors of the personal and social behaviors of leaders that contribute to a thriving culture. One notable exception is the leadership matrix developed by the NYC Leadership Academy. NYC

Leadership Academy created their Leadership Performance Standards Matrix from extensive research that examined behaviors linked to leaders who create positive change in student achievement. While the complete Leadership Matrix contains traditional standards related to student achievement, parent outreach, and instructional expertise, it also contains standards for the personal and interpersonal behaviors of effective leaders. The following excerpt from the matrix contains a sample of the latter, including indicators of those standards and examples of behaviors that would meet that standard.

Leadership Dimension	Meeting the Standard
1.0 Personal Behavior	
1.1 Reflects an appropriate response to situations	<p>Leader considers the consequence of his or her actions, anticipates possible responses or reactions, and accurately adjusts behavior accordingly.</p> <p>Leader understands and manages emotions and is aware of their impact.</p>
1.2 Consistent with expressed belief system and reflect personal integrity	<p>Leader's behavior reflects core values at all times.</p> <p>Leader's actions are transparent and there are no surprises.</p>
1.4 Values different points of view within the organization	<p>Leader actively seeks and makes use of diverse and controversial views.</p> <p>Leader welcomes and appreciates diversity in demonstrable ways.</p>
2.0 Resilience	
2.1 Reacts constructively to disappointment, admits errors, and learns from mistakes and setbacks	<p>Leader quickly transitions from emotional to strategic responses to mistakes and setbacks.</p>
2.3 Handles disagreement and dissent constructively	<p>Leader transforms disagreement and dissent into opportunities.</p>
3.0 Communication	
3.6 Communication reflects careful analysis and the ability to listen	<p>Leader attends and responds to subtle nonverbal cues in others.</p> <p>Leader deals with difficult issues honestly and directly, uses low-inference data and provides examples.</p> <p>Leader actively pursues disconfirming evidence for conclusions drawn.</p>
6.0 Learning	
6.2 Understands the role of a learner	<p>Leader is able to identify and take ownership of professional and leadership development needs.</p> <p>Leader understands that the best ideas emerge and are acted upon regardless of the source.</p>

	<p>Leader values mistakes in the service of learning and moves from the known to the unknown.</p> <p>Leader uses feedback and self-reflection to enhance own learning.</p>
9.0 Leadership Development	
9.1 Develops leadership in others	Leader provides formal and informal leadership opportunities for others and encourages them to exercise appropriate authority in those areas for which they are held accountable.
10.0 Climate and Culture	
10.1 Motivates and encourages others to achieve strategic goals	<p>Leader models, encourages, and reinforces efficacy in individuals to produce results and persevere even when internal and external difficulties interfere with the achievement of strategic goals.</p> <p>Leader generates a sense of urgency by aligning the energy of others in pursuit of strategic priorities.</p>

While we have understood for a while the important responsibilities that leaders have for student learning, we are just beginning to understand how effective leaders support the learning of the adults within a school community. It is the ongoing learning of the adults that ensures that the system continually improves. It is for this reason that we believe that it is the quality of leadership within a district and its ability to support “leadership everywhere” that is one of the key determinants of whether or not the system will *break through* the limitations that restrain its capacity.

TEN QUESTIONS TO EXAMINE THE STATE OF LEADERSHIP WITHIN A DISTRICT

1. How well does the climate support continuous learning?
2. How well do leaders create an inclusive environment for all educators?
3. How well do leaders inspire confidence?
4. How well do leaders balance advocacy with inquiry? Do they support risk taking?
5. To what degree does leadership depend on collaborative relationships as opposed to positional authority to achieve system goals?
6. How apparent are the core values of the system in daily interactions?
7. How clear is the system’s vision to all stakeholders?
8. What is the level of collective responsibility for achieving that vision?
9. To what degree does the district provide leadership with professional development?
10. Does the district’s evaluation criteria include an assessment of the leader’s personal behaviors, including resiliency, communication skills, use of feedback, and attention to school culture?

¹The standards were developed by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (comprised of a broad array of education organizations, state education agencies, teacher leaders, principals, superintendents, and institutions of higher education). The complete description of each standard can be found at http://www.nbpts.org/products_and_services/national_board_certifical

7 Why Building a K–12 Learning School System Is So Difficult

There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new order of things....Whenever his enemies have the ability to attack the innovator they do so with the passion of partisans, while the others defend him sluggishly, so that the innovator and his party alike are vulnerable.

—Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Leading a school or school district is very hard work. The work is intellectually and emotionally demanding, the work hours are very long, there are no “cookbooks” on how to produce excellent instruction, and rarely are school leaders ever thanked for leading instructional change. The harsh reality is that an effective school leader lives in a world of high aspirations, unmet student needs, insufficient resources, a lack of understanding by staff members and parents, and pressure from multiple constituencies whenever the school leader tries to make major instructional improvements or personnel changes. The job can be very lonely and frightening, particularly when school leaders decide they must make tough decisions that will upset some constituency (parents, teachers, students, unions, school board members, or supervisors).

The purpose of [Chapters 1](#) through [6](#) was to show the historical limitations of most school systems and then introduce the four internal systemic drivers that will contribute to breaking the limitations of the past and unleashing a dynamic K–12 learning school system. If we had wanted to paint a Pollyanna picture of a K–12 learning school system, we would have ended the book after [Chapter 6](#) on this upbeat note. However, in the real world, leading change is extremely difficult and will challenge the intellectual and emotional fiber of the best school administrators. In [Chapter 7](#), we discuss why deep systemic change is very difficult to achieve even when the conditions for change are in place. The primary purpose of [Chapter 7](#) is to present the very real obstacles teachers and administrators must overcome if they intend to create a K–12 learning school system. The sheer desire and will to create a collaborative learning culture is not enough.

LEADING CHANGE

Go to any major library and you will find at least a hundred books on leadership in the private sector with prescriptions on how to lead change. For example, in John Kotter’s bestseller, *Leading Change*, the Harvard Business School professor describes his eight-step change process for top-down change initiatives in large private organizations (1996). *Business Week* named Kotter as one of the top leadership gurus in America (“Rating,” 2001). What you won’t find in these libraries are many chapters in any book on why lasting change is unbelievably difficult to accomplish in a school system.

While we deeply respect the ideas by Kotter and others on how to change a company to make it more profitable, changing a school system is about changing the lives of children. In the private sector, the owner of the company or board of directors can measure success by dollars and cents. In a private business, the financial standard for success is clear and unambiguous and can be measured. However, in a public school system, parents and teachers often fight about what we want “our” children to learn and how success should be measured. The history of education is filled with fights over new ways to teach children better (for example, whole language, constructivist mathematics, open classrooms, and the use of standardized tests).

Leading change in public schools will arouse passionate discussions over academic content, values, and pedagogy. Ron Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, describes changing human behavior and attitudes as adaptive work, which arouses passion and resistance. Heifetz argues that adaptive work requires learning and cannot be mandated.

Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior. (1994, p. 13)

THE CHANGE PROCESS AS A LEARNING PROCESS

Whether a person is a CEO of a major company or a superintendent of schools, leading change within an organization is a multistage process and not an event. In the chart below, three major experts on organizational change identify the stages of change. Daniel Yankelovich is the founder of the Yankelovich/New York Times Poll and former chairman of the nonpartisan group Public Agenda; Gene Hall is the Dean of Education at the University of Nevada; and John Kotter is a former Harvard Business School professor. All three researchers identify the same three major phases: the awareness stage, the resistance stage, and the integration stage (See [Figure 7.1](#)).

In all three models, the leader’s job during first stage (the awareness stage) is to explain what change is needed and why. During this stage, the leader must present all constituents with a clear picture of the desired change and, in Yankelovich’s and Kotter’s models, also create a sense of urgency to motivate others.

Figure 7.1

	Ash and D'Auria	Yankelovich	Hall	Kotter
Stage 1	Awareness/ Innovation stage	1. Awareness	1. Talking stage	1. Create a sense of urgency
		2. Urgency		2. Put together a strong enough team to direct the process
Stage 2	Learning/ Resistance/ Working- through stage	3. Look for answers	2. Tinkering stage	3. Create an appropriate vision
		4. Resistance		4. Communicate that vision broadly
		5. "Choicework"		5. Remove obstacles
Stage 3	Integration stage	6. Initial, intellectual acceptance	3. Transforming stage	6. Create short-term wins
		7. Moral acceptance		7. Build momentum and use that momentum to tackle tougher change and problems
				8. Anchor the new behavior in the organizational culture

(For more information, see Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, and Koff, 2004; Kotter, 1996; and Yankelovich and Friedman, 2011.)

During the second stage (the resistance or working-through stage), the leader is likely to encounter serious resistance from stakeholders. Yankelovich calls this the *working-through stage*, rather than resistance stage, since all participants, including the leader, must confront the need for change, consider the pros and cons of the proposed actions, and struggle with trade-offs. According to Yankelovich, "In this stage of the learning curve people struggle to reconcile their positions on issues with their core values. In this sometimes stormy process, emotions play a more prominent role than objective analysis and deliberation" (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2011, p. 18). Leaders can expect backsliding, procrastination, and avoidance by some players. The back-and-forth process includes both a resistance and learning until the leader works through the problems in discussion with others.

During this second stage, the leader has a choice: either to view resistance by stubborn employees, parents, and board members as a "headwind," which must be pushed through or to use this stage as a process in which all participants learn deeply about the proposed change and its goals, work to improve the plan, and take steps to ensure adequate support from all participants. In a K–12 learning school system, successful leaders use the second stage as a learning process that encourages faculty, parents, and board members to ask questions, share ideas, and improve the proposed plan.

In the third stage (the integration stage), stakeholders accept the change, its rationale, and the pros and cons. During this stage, there is intellectual and emotional acceptance, transformation, and anchoring of the change by the stakeholders.

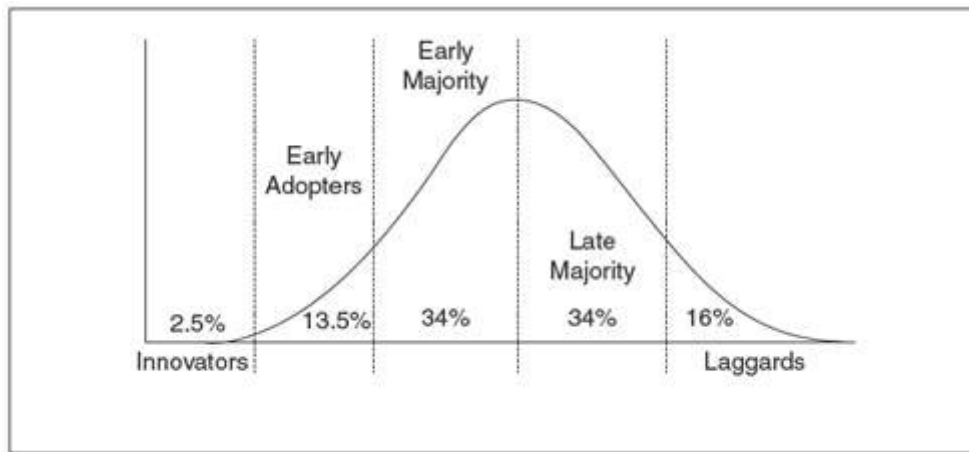
DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

In the mid-2000s, Everett Rogers's book titled *Diffusion of Innovations* was one of the most cited books in the social sciences (1995). For more than 30 years, Rogers studied the rate at which the public adopted new innovations. His theories have been used to examine how quickly the public adopts new technology, biological innovations, and ideas through communication. While his extensive research did not examine how quickly ideas were adopted in education, his studies in a wide range of fields strongly

suggest that there is a pattern to the adoption of new ideas: some people adopt them rapidly, some people are the followers, and some resist change.

Rogers proposed that adopters of any new innovation or idea fall into five categories: innovators (2.5%), early adopters (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%), and laggards (16%). Rogers acknowledged that a person might be an innovator for one innovation or idea but not for another. [Figure 7.2](#) graphically represents the categories listed above.

Figure 7.2 Rogers Adoption/Innovation Curve



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It is interesting that Rogers found that the adoption process follows a similar learning cycle to that identified by Yankelovich, Hall, and Kotter (awareness, working through, and integration). Rogers identified a five-step diffusion process for organizations (p. 421).

THE MECHANISM OF DIFFUSION

Initiation Phase

1. Agenda Setting—General organizational problems that may create a perceived need for innovation.
2. Matching—Fitting a problem from the organization's agenda with an innovation.

Implementation Phase

3. Refining and restructuring—People engage in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation.
4. Clarifying—The relationship between the organization and the innovation is defined more clearly.
5. Routinizing—The innovation becomes an ongoing element in the organization's activities and loses its identity.

While Rogers chose to combine his five-step process into two major phases (initiation and implementation), his diffusion theory also fits nicely with the three major phases identified by Yankelovich and Hall and the model we have described.

Ash and D'Auria	Rogers
Awareness/Innovation Stage	Agenda Setting Matching
Learning/Resistance/Working-Through Stage	Refining/Restructuring Clarifying
Integration Stage	Routinizing

According to Rogers's research, about 16% of the general population will quickly embrace new ideas. Who are the other 84% who will resist proposed initiatives and why?

THE RESISTERS: WHO THEY ARE

Are You an Obstacle to Change?—Why Is Change So Hard From the Leader's Point of View?

It is tempting to blame others for resisting change in your school or school system. However, sometimes the first line of resistance is the administrator him- or herself.

We have listed below six of the major factors that may hold you back from leading the change you want. Before launching a significant change in your school or school system, we ask each reader to consider his or her strengths and weaknesses in regard to each factor.

1. Personal Capacity—Do I have the capacity to figure out how to change a system or practice to achieve a desired outcome? Am I willing to do the very hard work?
2. Political Risk—Can I convince enough people to support the change? Who will support the proposed change and who will oppose it?
3. Practicality—Even if I know what change is needed (intellectual), and know we can garner enough internal and external support (political), do I have sufficient resources to succeed (money, time, human capital, energy, and drive)?
4. Personal Risk—What will happen to me if I promote the change (short- and long-term)? If the new initiative is a failure, can I withstand the impact in my work environment?
5. Emotional Impact—Do I have the intestinal fortitude to work for the vision and slog through resistance and severe criticism?
6. Social Impact—Am I willing to weaken long-standing personal and professional relationships and reduce trust in order to actualize the vision?

The good news is that you don't have to affirmatively answer the questions in all six categories during the awareness stage of leading change. During that first part of the change process, you still have the luxury of time to float an idea or initiative to others without significant risk to you. During the awareness stage, you can test the waters to find out: Do people think your idea has merit? How could they improve the idea? How many people agree with the idea? Will they support the change? Are there enough resources to launch the change? Once you have clarified your vision, built a guiding coalition of supporters, explained why the change is needed and why it will produce the intended outcomes, we then urge you to consider the questions in all six categories before finally deciding to push the change. Please see the end of this chapter for the full list of questions per category. Some of these questions may get

answered during the awareness stage. Other questions are highly personal and will require the school administrator to reflect deeply about his or her own capacity and drive.

Are Other People the Obstacle to Change?

Yes—It is fact that the superintendent of schools cannot implement most changes in a K–12 school system unilaterally. While the superintendent of a public K–12 district may have some independent powers, most authority, both formal and informal, is distributed among numerous constituencies. That means that, when implementing change, there are many, many other stakeholders in your community who can support, slow down, or stop that planned change.

For example, suppose that after many months of discussions with your principals and teachers, you have decided to announce that all teachers, K through 12, need common planning time each week to support teacher collaboration. However, since you do not have the unilateral authority to implement the changes you want, you most likely will need to seek out agreement from the principals (to support the change), the union (to change the teachers' contracts), the school board (to change the contract), the teachers who will implement the change, the parents (if the change will impact their child's schedule), and town, city, county, or school district officials and residents if additional funding will be needed for professional development or the overall teacher bargaining agreement. Even if outstanding ideas emerge from within the K–12 learning community itself, implementing these ideas will usually require support from multiple constituencies.

To illustrate the minimum number of constituencies in a small school system, we chose a school system in a town with one high school, one middle school, and one elementary school. In this small school system, there are at least fourteen constituencies who could potentially block a good idea if funding is needed. Even if no funding is needed, there are countless subgroups who could exercise power. The fourteen major constituencies are:

1. The School Board
2. The Union
3. The Town's Finance Committee
4. The Town's Board of Selectmen
5. The Town Meeting
6. The High School Principal
7. The High School Faculty
8. The High School Parents
9. The Middle School Principal
10. The Middle School Faculty
11. The Middle School Parents
12. The Elementary School Principal
13. The Elementary School Faculty
14. The Elementary School Parents

The good news is that in most school systems, there is a moderate to high degree of trust among and between the various constituencies. As mentioned earlier, a high level of trust is one of the major drivers that makes it possible for different groups to talk and find ways to change a learning organization. However, in some school systems, particularly urban school systems, one constituency may have the power to block a plan that would improve the schools.

While leading significant change is difficult, we are not aware of research that shows K–12 districts cannot be led systemically. In fact, in a recent unpublished study of all superintendents in Massachusetts, 86% of the superintendents reported that their working relationship with their school committee (board) was highly effective (43%) or somewhat effective (43%). These same superintendents also reported that their “school committee supports me and my actions regularly” (81%), and they “like the superintendency well enough to encourage a son or daughter showing the aptitude to pursue it” (Strongly agree 24%, and agree 56%). The Massachusetts study shows that superintendents like their work and feel supported by their school board.

WHAT ELSE CAN GET IN YOUR WAY?

The Debris Field

As an experienced school administrator, you are highly organized. You have carefully planned the year. The district annual and school goals, as well as your requested budget, have been approved; the capital projects are well underway; and all teachers have been hired for the fall. Then, the unexpected happens, which throws a major obstacle in your way and stops your well-planned initiatives. We call these unplanned obstacles *the debris field*. Although not as dangerous as walking through a minefield, every experienced administrator has and will encounter unexpected events (the debris field) that will upset even the most carefully made plans. Here is one real example from the Boston area.

One day in mid-August of 2010, the superintendent of schools received a telephone call from the director of public facilities that a recent air test showed polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) levels were well above the EPA safety guidelines in an elementary school. The superintendent and the facilities director were forced to spend significant funds to remove window caulk that contained PCBs, expecting that the PCB airborne levels would drop. A week later, just before the students returned in the fall, new test results showed no change in airborne PCB levels. Removing the window caulk that contained PCBs did not lower PCB levels in the air.

On September 6, during the first week of school, hundreds of angry parents and residents filled the town’s auditorium to hear about the PCB problem. The superintendent of schools had assembled a panel that included representatives from an environmental consulting company, a representative from the Environmental Protection Agency, the chairman of the local Department of Public Health, the local director of public health, the director of public facilities, and himself. The local experts and the EPA stated that exposure to PCBs is not a short-term health concern for children. Based on the experts’ opinions, the superintendent recommended that the school be kept open for now while a PCB mitigation plan was established and implemented. He indicated that he would establish a PCB advisory committee that included parents, teachers, local officials, and expert consultants to advise the administration. However, many, many parents said their children were in danger and demanded the school be closed immediately. One parent said that even one molecule of PCB was too much for his child.

Resolving this crisis meant that nearly all other goals for the year were pushed to the back burner, and hundreds of hours of staff time were reallocated to meet with experts, parents, elected officials, union officials, state officials, and educators in the school. Ultimately, reducing the PCB levels below the EPA guidelines cost nearly 1 million dollars.

While this debris field crisis is an extreme case, all administrators will encounter the debris field from time to time: severe union issues, a major budget shortfall due to unexpected special education placements, a tragic event regarding student safety, or parents who rise up to complain about some topic that was not on the radar screen.

Unlike the initiatives you choose to first study and then launch, debris field obstacles come without warning and will probably challenge your very core as a leader. In the PCB scenario, the superintendent had no expertise in environmental science, many parents were hysterical, the science on the safety of PCBs was new, safety questions could not be answered with certainty, some long-term teachers in the school began to ask about possible cancer risks, the school board looked to the superintendent to lead (what did he know?), the EPA expected prompt action, and there were no funds in the school budget to

handle the crisis. This crisis challenged all six personal areas of the best administrators: personal capacity, political skills, practical considerations, personal risk, emotional capacity, and social capital (see *The Obstacle Course*, p. 152).

Too Many Initiatives

Talk to almost any schoolteacher and you are likely to hear that he or she is overworked, with too many demands and not enough resources. Now, in this environment, imagine that the school leader or superintendent suggests that a new initiative be added. Is it any wonder why teachers may resist or seriously question the wisdom and urgency of the new program?

Earlier in this chapter, we described the usual processes for presenting, debating, and implementing a new idea that allows faculty members to discuss program efficacy and alternatives. One other idea we suggest you consider is to hold a “pull the weeds before you plant the flowers” party (Reeves, 2006, pp. 89–90). Ask faculty members to attend a faculty meeting and bring one program they want to discontinue (a “weed”) because they believe that program is no longer needed or effective. Reeves suggests three rules to help schools stay focused on what is important.

1. Use intergrade dialogue to find the essentials and eliminate what is not essential.
2. Prune away the small stuff that uses up valuable time.
3. Set the stage for a weed-free garden. Respect teachers’ time, and start and end meetings on time.

The Tyranny of *or*

Jim Collins, in the book *Built to Last*, wrote about the successful habits of visionary companies that have been highly successful (2002). One habit he found was that great companies believe in the “Genius of the *and*” and avoided the “Tyranny of *or*.” In these visionary companies, he found that there was an “ability to embrace both extremes of a number of dimensions at the same time.” Instead of choosing between A or B, they figure out a way to have both A and B. In companies that fell into the trap of the Tyranny of *or*, leaders and regular employees believed you always had to make a choice between two seemingly different ideas. In Collins’s book, he identified the following choices (p. 43):

- You can have change *or* stability
- You can be conservative *or* bold
- You can have low cost *or* high quality
- You can have creative autonomy *or* consistency and control
- You can invest for the future *or* do well in the short term

In education, we too have fallen into these traps:

- Whole language *or* phonics
- Traditional mathematics *or* constructivist mathematics
- Homogeneous grouping of students *or* heterogeneous grouping of students
- Self-contained classrooms *or* flexible grouping of students between classrooms
- Top-down leadership *or* bottom-up leadership
- Teacher autonomy *or* teacher collaboration

One of the obstacles that prevents school leaders from creating a whole school system out of its many parts is falling into the trap of the tyranny of *or*. The more we allow people to create false dichotomies, the more opportunities we lose to offer students diverse choices, create synergy between multiple approaches, and the more we allow people to remain in their silos. In a learning school system, the goal is to create collaboration in all directions and combine programs with different philosophies into one coherent system. For example, we need to both honor the work of the individual teacher in the

classroom *and* support opportunities for teachers to collaborate in and outside the classroom. Since none of us are as smart as all of us, we need to find ways to bring together educators who have different ideas, rather than allow only one set of good ideas to survive and push out opportunities for growth. We recommend that learning leaders explicitly talk about the power of *and*, even if it makes some people uncomfortable.

Resisters Don't Share Your Interests and Goals

Anyone who has bought a car knows that the car dealership's interest is to make a sale and maximize profit, while your goal is to buy the car at the lowest price. In this example, perhaps the two sides can reach an agreement by splitting the difference. However, in schools there are some times when the parties cannot split the difference.

In one system, the superintendent wanted to start a Mandarin Chinese program, based on the importance of China today and the fact that there are 800 million Mandarin speakers in China alone. After proposing his new idea, he learned that the middle school French and Spanish teachers opposed the new program. After some discussions with the middle school principal, the superintendent was told that the teachers were worried that a new Mandarin program would mean fewer students taking their subjects and that some veteran teachers might lose their jobs.

Once in a while, the interests of the faculty members may collide with the interests of the students and no compromise is possible. In such cases, if the leader is convinced that students have a compelling need that can only be met by launching the new initiative, then this is the rare case in which the leader must make a decision, explain it clearly to all constituencies, and be prepared for some upset faculty members.

Lack of Trust, Collaboration in All Directions, Leadership Everywhere, and Capacity Building (The Four Drivers of Change)

In [Chapters 3](#) through [6](#), we described the four major drivers of change needed to significantly improve the quality of a school or school system. We argued that high levels of all four attributes at the same time will create a synergy and unleash teacher potential across the district. On the other hand, if these four drivers are low or absent, then launching any new initiative is likely to fail. Consider what would happen without the four drivers:

1. Lack of Trust—Without trust, why would any faculty member, parent, or school board member follow the school or district leader? Without trust, it is less likely that faculty members will make the leap of faith from the “Present Known” to the “Promised Land.”

2. Lack of Collaboration—Without collaboration from colleagues, it is much less likely that faculty members will agree to the new initiative.

3. Lack of Leadership—If the school or district administrator is not respected as a leader, then few faculty members, parents, or board members will ever agree to the plan. Ultimately, people follow leaders because they believe in the vision and believe that the leader can successfully implement the vision.

4. Lack of Capacity Building—Without meaningful capacity-building activities, why would faculty members agree to a new initiative and risk professional failure, or worse, having an adverse impact on students? A lack of support for faculty members will increase resistance to the new idea and cause failure if it is mandated.

In conclusion, we urge the reader to take the Obstacle Course that appears in the next few pages. We have assembled this self-assessment tool so that the reader can quickly assess whether he or she has the tools needed to launch a new initiative and overcome the likely obstacles.

THE OBSTACLE COURSE

A Self-Assessment of What Obstacles Are in Your Way

Yes	Maybe	No
(Not an obstacle)	?	(Is an obstacle)

Are You an Obstacle to Change?	
Personal Capacity	
	1. Do I believe I have the personal capacity to figure out how to change the system or practice to achieve the desired outcome?
	2. Am I willing to do the very hard work necessary to plan and implement the change?
Political	
	1. Can I convince enough people to support the change?
	2. Do I know who will support the proposed change and who will oppose it?
Practical	
	1. Even if I know what change is needed (intellectual), and know that we can garner enough internal and external support (political), do I have sufficient resources to succeed (money, time, human capital, energy and drive)?
Personal Risk	
	1. Can I predict what will happen to me if I promote the change (short- and long-term)?
	2. If the new initiative is a failure, can I withstand the impact in my work environment?
Emotional	
	1. Do I have the intestinal fortitude to work for the vision and slog through resistance and severe criticism?
Social	
	1. Am I willing to weaken longstanding personal and professional relationships and reduce trust in order to actualize the vision?

Is Your School Board an Obstacle to Change?	
	1. Does the school board have confidence in your leadership?
	2. Do you anticipate that the school board will support your proposed change?
	3. Do you already have sufficient resources (money and staff) to implement the change?
Is the Union Leadership an Obstacle to Change?	
	1. Does the union contract allow you to make the change without the union's support?
	2. If you do not legally need the union's support to make the change, will the union support the change?
	3. Do you have a cooperative working relationship with the union leadership?
	4. If you answered <i>no</i> to the prior question, will the school board support changing the teachers' contract during the next round of collective bargaining? (If you answered <i>yes</i> or <i>maybe</i> to the prior question, then skip this question.)
Are the Principals or the Superintendent an Obstacle to Change?	
	1. In the past, have the principals, as a group, and the superintendent supported your vision?
	2. Are you, the principals, and the superintendent a high-performing team?
	3. Are the principals by themselves a high-performing team?
	4. Do the principals have the backbone to lead your proposed change?
	5. Does the superintendent have the backbone to lead your proposed change?
	6. Are most principals and the superintendent willing to have difficult conversations with staff members?
	7. Are the principals willing to relinquish some site-based management to be part of a K-12 team?
Are Your Parents an Obstacle to Change?	
	1. Are your parents pleased with the schools?
	2. Will the proposed change have little or no direct effect on the parents or their children?
	3. Are your parents comfortable with little or no involvement in decision making?
	4. Are you able to make the proposed change without parent support?

Are the Teachers an Obstacle to Change?	
1.	Is the proposed change supported by a compelling educational vision?
2.	Do teachers have the energy to support and implement the proposed change? Are they burdened with too many other initiatives?
3.	Are the teachers likely to support the proposed change?
4.	Are those likely to resist the change well respected?
5.	Do you have the time needed to provide needed dialogue?
6.	Will you have adequate professional development to support the teachers?
7.	Will you have sufficient teacher collaboration to support the change?
8.	Will the proposed change mean an increase of autonomy for teachers?
Are the Local Governing Boards and Officials an Obstacle to Change?	
1.	Does your proposed change require additional funds?
2.	Does your proposed change require a vote of non-school people?
3.	Does your proposed change affect other residents (in addition to parents)?
Are There Other Factors That Are Obstacles to Change?	
1.	The school or school system has the resources to overcome the obstacles listed above?
2.	Can this proposed change be integrated into other initiatives? (<i>genius of and, not the tyranny of or</i>)
3.	Is the proposed change in the interest of all groups, including the students?
Are Other People or Other Organizations an Obstacle to Change?	
List them here:	

How Strong Are the Four Drivers in Your System?			
	Weak	Moderate	High
Trust			
Collaboration			
Leadership			
Capacity Building			