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NEVER

underestimate


 YOUR
teachers

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INTRODUCTION: *ANY TEACHER?*

If we truly believe that all children can learn, then we must believe that all educators can learn, even in the face of contrary evidence.

—Roland S. Barth, *On Common Ground*

My conviction that any teacher can become a master teacher tends to provoke certain reactions. Some people smile indulgently and murmur something about the naiveté of youth. “You’ll learn,” they say. Others are taken aback by the boldness of the statement. “Any teacher?” they ask incredulously, while shaking their heads. “You haven’t met some of the teachers in *my* building.” Still others eye me suspiciously, as if I am some sort of huckster offering them a sip of snake oil to wash down a handful of magic beans.

Even those who agree with me in principle want to revise the statement. “I’d say *most* teachers,” they say cautiously. “Not every teacher is going to become a master teacher.”

This is the perspective that defines much of the professional development for educational leaders. It’s why we focus more on helping teachers fix aspects of practice than on helping them pursue limitless excellence. It explains why entire curricula and school programs have been built on the idea that student achievement can somehow be teacher-proofed. And this

habit of underestimating our teachers is what drives so many administrators and reformers to spend more time talking about getting rid of bad teachers than they do about transforming them into good ones. It seems that while we gladly embrace the idea that all children can learn successfully, we do not extend the same idealism to our colleagues. Any child can learn, but the adults? Well, that's another story.

The tendency is to separate teachers into two categories: the silk purses and the sow's ears. Although we acknowledge that a silk purse may occasionally turn out to be a sow's ear, rarely does it happen the other way around. It's as if we believe that teaching skill is a static gift: everyone is born with a certain amount, and it can't be taught. But this idea creates a bizarre schism. The foundation of our work as educators is that we believe in the human potential to learn, to get better, to grow. Why do we embrace that fundamental belief when it comes to our students and yet reject it as unrealistic when it comes to our colleagues?

Maybe it's because, in the experience of most of us, the really great teachers are a rare breed. Saying that any teacher can become a master teacher seems to sully the idea of masterful teaching, making it, well, *common*. And yet, shouldn't masterful teaching be common? Shouldn't every student have the benefit of a master teacher?

Why Master Teachers?

While we're asking questions, why are master teachers so important, anyway? Does everyone have to be exceptional? Won't a pretty good teacher or even a not-so-bad teacher do?

These are legitimate questions, and in order to answer them we must look at what we mean when we say "master teacher." The quickest definition is that a master teacher is one who helps every student in the classroom meet or exceed the standards. Every student. The master teacher's approach to teaching is seamless. Master teachers seem to instinctively know what to do to help each child learn. They have a large repertoire of skills, and they know when and how to deploy these skills to best help their students.

Master teachers consistently get at least a year's worth of growth out of a year's worth of school; some researchers even argue that master

teachers can help students make twice as much progress as an average teacher can (Hanushek, 2004). With an average teacher, a student who begins the year reading at a 3rd grade level might end the year reading at an early 4th grade level. Not bad—and certainly preferable to spending the year with an ineffective teacher and finishing the year still reading at a 3rd grade level. But put that student in a master teacher’s class, and by the end of the year, he will be reading at a late 4th grade level and possibly at a 5th grade level. Over time, having a master teacher can make up for disadvantages such as family background and poor early educational experiences. In fact, a student who has a master teacher five years in a row prior to 7th grade can overcome the average mathematics achievement gap that exists between lower- and higher-income students.

So, given the difference masterful teaching makes in students’ learning, I’ll ask again: Why shouldn’t masterful teaching be the goal—the attainable goal—of every teacher in the profession? And why shouldn’t promoting masterful teaching be a goal of every school leader? It should be, and it could be. And the very first step is to stop underestimating our teachers. Great instructional leadership means rejecting the idea of masterful teaching as a gift endowed to a select few. It means seeing masterful teaching for what it really is: a combination of skills and attitudes that can be learned . . . and that can be taught.

The Test of Leadership

Leadership is not so much getting people to follow you as it is working through other people to accomplish the vision and goals of the institution. Just as teachers might be judged by how well they handle their most challenging students, we school leaders can be judged by how we handle our most challenging teachers. It is easy to lead those who want to be led, but being able to lead those who initially resist? That’s the ultimate test of leadership.

I learned this lesson the hard way (ironically enough, as I was writing this book). Some things to know about me: I was a pretty good middle school administrator. I have coached hundreds of principals, assistant principals, headmasters, deans, and central office administrators on how to help any teacher become a master teacher. I have written a book

(Jackson, 2008) that provides step-by-step guidance on how to have difficult conversations with teachers. And I regularly give speeches on the topic, write articles, and offer advice to administrators who are frustrated and down to their last straw. It would be reasonable to think that I would know exactly what to do if my own leadership were tested, right?

Wrong.

Mrs. Quinton* was a difficult teacher, and she defied my ability to help her. Her problem was not that she didn't know how to teach; it was that she was interested in teaching only certain students—the bright, motivated ones who were already eager to learn. For years, she had been considered one of the best teachers at her school, and she had long occupied a leadership position on the staff. Her colleagues were fiercely loyal to her because she did them little favors; they would not change unless she said so, even if they believed that changing was best for the school. When it came to dealing with Mrs. Quinton, the principal had thrown up his hands. He was afraid to get on her bad side because he knew that if he did, he would lose the cooperation of his entire staff. They would pick her over him.

Enter me. The leadership expert. The fancy paid consultant, brought in to help this school increase rigor in every classroom.

At first, I tried to befriend Mrs. Quinton and convince her that the kind of changes I had in mind would be good for the school. She agreed with me in principle but had very different ideas of how to implement change. In fact, she only wanted to make marginal adjustments to the way things were run, which basically amounted to no change at all. So I tried to work around her, talking with other teachers and providing them resources. Many of them would agree with me in private conversation and make plans to run their classrooms differently, only to change their minds after talking with her.

One morning, after a particularly difficult interaction with Mrs. Quinton, I headed to the principal's office in a huff, my head full of how impossible she was and how she was poisoning the attitudes of the rest of the staff. I was ready to tell him it was time for her to go. But when I sat down in his office, I noticed a copy of my book, *The Instructional Leader's Guide to Strategic Conversations with Teachers*, sitting on his desk. How could I

*The teachers and principals you'll meet in this book are all real people, not composites. Unless otherwise noted, their names and a few distinguishing details have been changed.

tell him to get rid of this teacher when my book made the case that every teacher could be “moved and improved”? How could I say that Mrs. Quinton was impossible to work with when I had provided templates that purported to help any leader work with any teacher?

The easy thing to do would have been to get rid of her. But doing that would have seriously damaged the school culture, which would itself have impeded the school’s progress. Instead, the principal and I formulated a new plan to work with Mrs. Quinton. When all was said and done, we helped her not only embrace the changes we were trying to make at the school but also improve her own instructional practice and become a much more reflective teacher.

When we become instructional leaders, we don’t stop being teachers. The difference is that now we teach *through* other people. Our biggest leadership challenge is not that *we* don’t know what to do to increase student success; our biggest challenge is that we must get our teachers to do it.

Your school is only as good as your worst teacher. What’s more, *you* are only as good as your ability to handle your worst teacher. Many books on leadership focus on rigorously examining data, developing a vision, and building a proper organizational infrastructure in order to make schools more effective. And they’re right. These things are important, and they can be powerful. Yet if you do all that and cannot communicate your vision and your plans to the people who must carry them out, if you cannot inspire teachers to change, if you cannot monitor and give feedback in a way that will ensure that change happens, then you will never get the results you are seeking.

We all have in our heads the image of the school leader who has such a compelling vision, such a strong personality, that the school changes in spite of itself. But the truth is much more boring than that: If you want to move your school forward, you have to move the people in it. If you want excellent instruction in every classroom, you have to help every teacher become an excellent instructor.

Using This Book

In the pages to come, you will learn a process for helping every teacher become a master teacher—a process that I have developed over the past

10 years in my work as an instructional coach, school administrator, and educational consultant. It is the result of the lessons I've learned as I've helped principals, assistant principals, central office leaders, instructional coaches, and superintendents grapple with the very real challenges they face in their urban, suburban, and rural schools throughout the United States. The strategies I'll be sharing have worked time and time again, and if you really want to move your teachers and your school forward, this is the work you must do.

Never Underestimate Your Teachers does not address developing a mission statement or communicating your vision to your staff. It won't teach you how to set goals and achieve them. There are other books that do a good job of showing you how to do those things—all of which are important in leading a school. But this book is not about leading a school; it's about leading teachers.

Over the course of six chapters, I am going to show you how to recognize good teaching and what to do if you aren't seeing it in the classroom. We'll look at evaluation as something undertaken not to identify and get rid of bad teachers but to help bad ones become good, good ones become great, and great ones become even greater. You will learn how to meet these teachers where they are and, through a series of supports, help them all move forward. I'll share real-life stories of how I and other school leaders have tackled the kinds of challenges you face in your school. Many of the skills and strategies we used are ones you already know; what you'll learn is how to leverage those skills and strategies to make a real impact.

Chapter 1 provides the foundation for this knowledge, deconstructing what good teaching really is and how it incorporates both *teacher skill* and *teacher will*. The chapters that follow examine how you can affect both of these aspects so that over time your teachers get better and better at what they do. You'll find "Yes, but . . ." sections designed to address common concerns and "Takeaways" that summarize each chapter's key points—and are perfect for sharing with other members of your instructional leadership team. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses how to bring all the strategies you have learned together to shape a professional culture at your school where every teacher is on a sure pathway to masterful teaching and, as a result, every student is on a surer pathway to success.

If you are an instructional coach, you'll learn strategies for helping teachers grow and want to grow. You'll learn how to help teachers prepare for and respond to observations and evaluations and how to inspire and support all the teachers you serve to work toward mastery. If you are a teacher leader (i.e., a department head, a team leader, a lead teacher), you'll learn strategies for moving your team forward toward team and school goals. You'll also learn how to straddle the dual roles of teacher and leader in a way that best supports the teachers you serve. If you are a school-based administrator, you'll learn how to move your entire school toward a professional culture that is focused on masterful teaching, and how to help each of your teachers ultimately get there. You'll learn specific strategies for facilitating the observation process and helping teachers use the observation process to grow toward mastery. And, if you are a district leader, you'll learn how to best support the schools you lead so that every teacher in every school is continuously improving. You'll also learn strategies that will help you design and implement a teacher evaluation process that truly improves teaching and learning. No matter which of these roles is yours, you'll learn how to identify what is important for teachers to focus on and how to develop better teachers and, ultimately, better schools.

To help you succeed in this very important work, this book's Appendix contains several other tools to help you put what you are learning into practice, including diagnostics you can use to help you determine a teacher's skill level and prime motivator and to determine your own prime motivator as well. We have also created a companion website at www.mindstepsinc.com/lead so that we can share even more tools, tips, and strategies.

After reading this book, you'll know exactly how to assess and move the teachers you serve toward mastery. You'll have a plan for getting started and all the tools you need to make it work. And you'll know how to access other resources to support and sustain your work over time. In short, you'll have everything you need to build and lead master teachers.

Now, let's get to work.