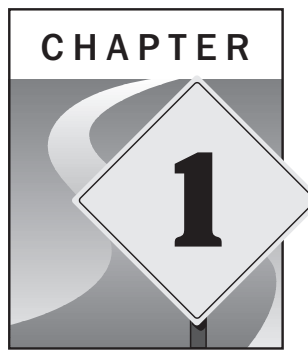


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# Shifting Gears

## Changing the System

*An educational adage I have heard for years is that teachers teach as they were taught, and that their classroom management starts out somewhat shaky, improves over the course of three to five years, peaks after about seven years, and then plateaus for the rest of their careers. This, to me, is like saying that when we learn to drive we start out in neutral, take some time to learn the difference between shifting into reverse and first gear, finally get the car into first, and never shift into a different gear. Would anyone choose to drive a car like that? Wouldn't it take forever to get where we wanted to go if we were permanently stuck in first gear? Do we want to shift into a higher gear in classroom management? I believe the "classroom car" will get students on their way to better learning in less time if we just "shift up" our management.*

| <b>CHANGING THE SYSTEM</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Looks Like</b>   | <b>Sounds Like</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading books by Senge, Kohn, Glasser, Good, Gossen, IRI/SkyLight authors</li> <li>• multiple intelligences in use</li> <li>• authentic assessment in use</li> <li>• teacher facilitating and mediating</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’ve read about this—I wonder if it will work with our kids.”</li> <li>• lots of “learning noise”</li> <li>• “This time we’ll assess by . . . .”</li> <li>• “Did you think about trying . . . ? I don’t know? What do you think?”</li> </ul> |

**Figure 1.1**

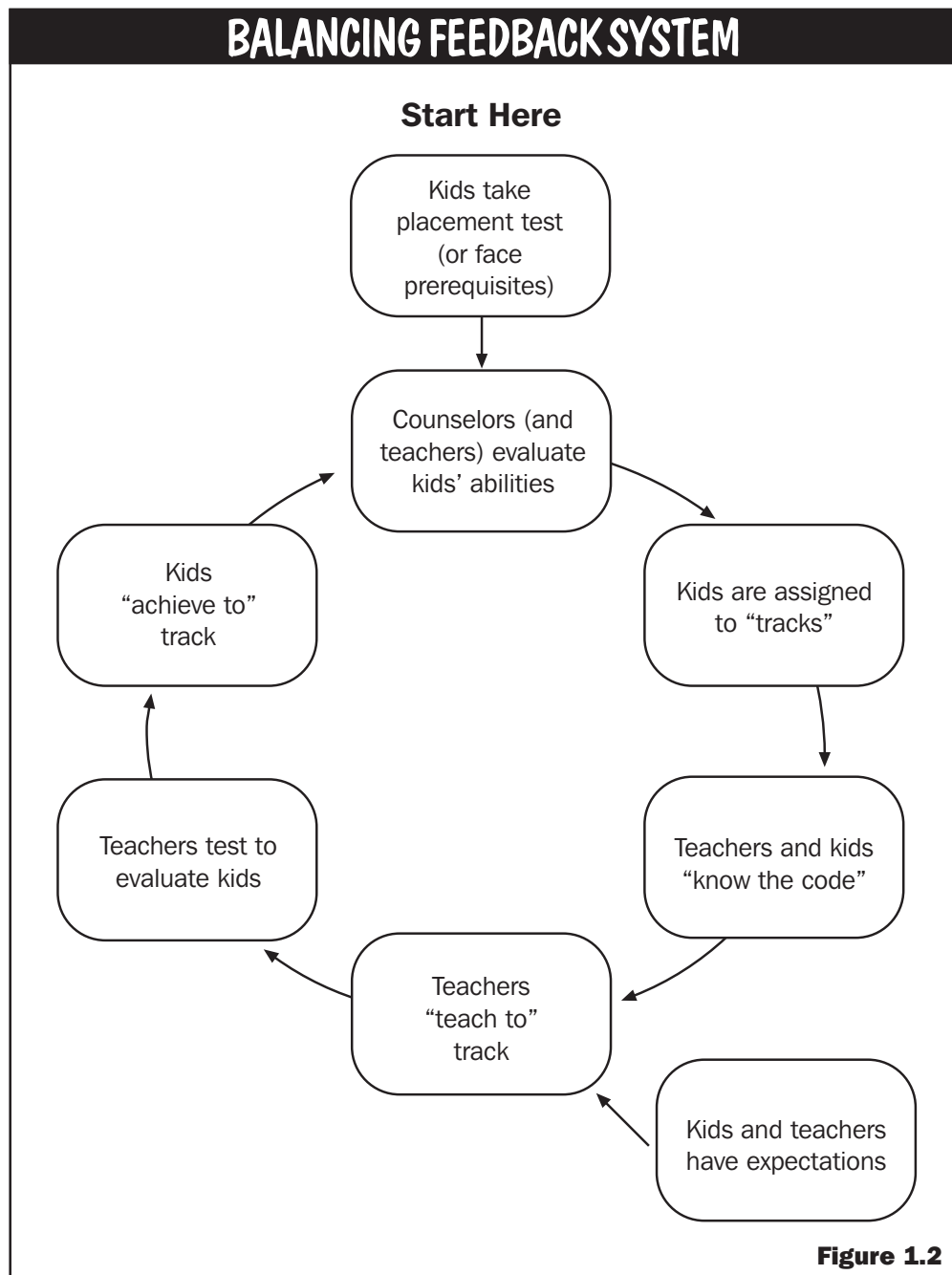
Whenever I thought about creating a quality classroom, I would say to myself, “. . . the problem is that Deming and Glasser say that to get quality we need to change the system, and I just can’t change the system all by myself. If *the rest of the school and the district administration* don’t want to change the system, I can’t do much about it.” Then I had a new perception. The classroom I managed was its own microsystem. This new perception helped free up my thinking and let me find new ways of looking at changing the system in ways that would help my students. Maybe I didn’t have the power to change the macrosystem, the entire school, but as manager, I did have the power to change the system of one classroom.

## Defining the Old System

The first thing I wanted to do was to define the system I was trying to change. I thought that describing it would help me clarify what changes I wanted to make and how those changes might fit together.

Here’s my picture of the old system. It is an example of what Peter Senge calls a *balancing feedback* system (see Figure 1.2).

A balancing feedback system tends to maintain the status quo. The system that I wanted to change certainly does that. Teachers



expect the results that the assigned track predicts, the kids know their placement tracks and expect to achieve at those levels, and the teaching and learning (or achievement) combine to verify the placement. “They’re only average!” or “They’re the gifted and talented group!” become self-fulfilling prophecies. I believe that the system described by this feedback loop gives teachers, kids, and counselors what they expected to get when the placement was first made.