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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>1. Removing the Rose-Colored Glasses</b>	<b>1</b>
The Rose-Colored Glasses Phenomenon	1
<i>Red Flag Warnings</i>	3
<i>Demonstrating Moral Courage</i>	6
Leading Change: Necessary Dispositions	7
<i>Perceptions About the Role of a School Leader</i>	7
<i>Confidence in Self as an Instructional Leader</i>	10
<i>A Growth Mindset</i>	11
<i>Moral Courage</i>	13
Key Points About Removing the Rose-Colored Glasses	14
Putting Words Into Action	15
<i>Reflecting on Your Current State</i>	15
<i>Action Tools</i>	16
<b>2. No More Lake Wobegon: Creating a Culture of Learning</b>	<b>19</b>
The Effects of Well-Intended Fiction: A Culture of Nice	19
The Changing Landscape	21
The Leader's Role: Essential Beliefs and Understandings	22
<i>Changing Beliefs: Practice Comes First!</i>	22
<i>Drinking the Water</i>	24
<i>Understanding About Learning</i>	26
<i>A Presumption of Continuous Growth for All</i>	27

Setting the Stage: Defining Who We Are	28
<i>Capturing the School's History</i>	28
<i>Developing Core Beliefs and Commitments</i>	30
Demonstrating Beliefs: Actions of the School Leader	32
<i>Developing Trust and Rapport</i>	32
<i>Step Aside and Lead: Creating Opportunities for Learning</i>	34
Key Points About Creating a Culture of Learning	35
Putting Words Into Action	36
<i>Reflecting on Your Current State</i>	36
<i>Action Tools</i>	37
<b>3. The Wisdom of Instructional Leadership:</b>	
<b>What Leaders Need to Know and Do</b>	<b>39</b>
Knowledge of Staff	40
Understandings About Teaching and Learning	43
<i>What Is Good Teaching?</i>	43
<i>How Good Is Good Enough?</i>	46
<i>How Does Learning Occur?</i>	47
<i>What Is Engagement in Learning?</i>	48
Skills of the Instructional Leader	51
<i>Collecting Evidence to Assess Teaching</i>	52
<i>Engaging in Professional Conversations</i>	54
<i>Skillful Questioning</i>	55
<i>Productive Listening</i>	56
<i>Providing Feedback</i>	57
<i>Facilitating Professional Goal Setting</i>	58
Key Points About What Leaders Need to Know	59
Putting Words Into Action	60
<i>Reflecting on Your Current State</i>	60
<i>Action Tools</i>	60
<b>4. The Wisdom of Instructional Practice:</b>	
<b>What Teachers Need to Know</b>	<b>65</b>
Playing a Guessing Game	65
Guessing Games Replaced by Transparency	66
<i>Understandings About Teaching and Learning</i>	66
<i>Putting Your Know-How Into Action:</i>	
<i>A Cycle of Continuous Improvement and Growth</i>	68
Don't Forget to Feed the Teachers!	71
A Plan for Teacher Learning	73
Key Points About What Teachers Need to Know	75

Putting Words Into Action	75
<i>Reflecting on Your Current State</i>	75
<i>Action Tool</i>	76
<b>5. Promoting Teacher Learning: It's All Talk!</b>	<b>83</b>
Powerful Conversations	83
Setting the Stage	85
<i>Acknowledging the Leader's Dual Role</i>	85
<i>Making Intentions Clear</i>	87
Factors That Impact Conversations	89
<i>Rapport and Relationship With the Teacher</i>	90
<i>The Developmental Level of the Teacher</i>	91
<i>The School Culture</i>	91
<i>The Data Collected About Teaching and Learning</i>	92
<i>The Teacher's Mindset</i>	93
<i>The Skills of the Leader Facilitating the Conversation</i>	94
Leading Conversations: When, What, and How	95
<i>When to Talk</i>	95
<i>What to Talk About</i>	96
<i>How to Talk</i>	97
Key Points About Promoting Teacher Learning	101
Putting Words Into Action	102
<i>Reflect on Your Current State</i>	102
<i>Action Tool</i>	102
<b>6. Principals Can't Lead Alone: The Role of the District Office</b>	<b>105</b>
Improving Instruction: Does the Central Office Matter?	105
<i>A Case in Point</i>	106
Increased Accountability for Leaders	106
Creating a Culture for Professional Learning: A Case Study	107
<i>A Powerful First Impression</i>	107
<i>A History of Principal Autonomy</i>	109
<i>Getting the Right Members on the Team</i>	110
<i>Learning for All Adults in the System</i>	112
<i>Aligning School and District Goals and Priorities</i>	112
<i>Teacher Evaluation a Tool for Teacher Learning</i>	113
<i>Professional Development as the Fuel for the System</i>	115
<i>Expanding Professional Learning Across the District</i>	116
<i>Finding Time for Professional Learning</i>	118
<i>Securing the Future of Leaders and the Professional Staff</i>	118

learning. Based on a premise of continuous learning for all, Chapter Two provides detailed action steps school leaders can take to create a culture for learning and change existing mindsets that may fear constructive criticism and feedback. As a result, leaders will be able to engage teachers in the change process needed to improve the quality of teaching.

Chapter Three lays out, in detail, the essential understandings about learning that are central to instructional leadership. It begins with having knowledge of the staff. Much like a teacher needs to know their students, school leaders must know their teachers as learners and as people. The chapter also details the skills of instructional leadership, such as observing and collecting evidence of teaching, communicating with teachers, and providing them with resources for learning and growth. It includes a detailed discussion of a critical concept for school leaders, student engagement, distinguishing it from mere compliance in the classroom.

Chapter Four focuses on what teachers need to know so that they can be active participants in their own learning. Although it would be impossible to put everything teachers need to know into one chapter, it is essential that teachers have the same information as their school leaders regarding learning and what constitutes effective practice. This promotes transparency, essential for engaging teachers as active participants in their own professional growth. It describes what teachers need to know so that they are able to engage in self-assessment, reflection, and professional conversations with their leaders. The chapter provides a model of how to embed this learning within the school so that it is sustainable over time.

Chapter Five underscores the value of professional conversation in promoting teacher learning. It is not enough for leaders to know what to talk about with teachers. They need how to strategies for talking with teachers in ways that will promote professional learning. This essential chapter provides a protocol for conducting conversations with teachers as a follow up to formal and informal classroom visits. Most of the current literature dealing with classroom walk-throughs or mini-observations fails to stress the importance of collaborative professional conversations in the process. Successful use of the protocol is based on school leaders and teachers having the prerequisite understandings outlined in the previous chapters.

Chapter Six rounds out the book by examining the critical role the district office plays in improving teacher quality. The support and commitment of the central office to teacher effectiveness is essential for building leaders to have in their work with teachers. The chapter presents a case study of instructional leadership where the

in ratings of teacher effectiveness, such as structured observations of teachers, review of teacher portfolios, and assessments of teacher competencies, knowledge, and skills.

What does this mean for the teachers of Lake Wobegon and beyond? Simply stated, it means that teacher ratings will change. Teachers who have become accustomed to receiving the highest rating each year (usually this is “satisfactory”), may no longer achieve the highest score. The lens through which we examine the quality of teaching has changed. It includes a much more comprehensive look at teaching than we have settled for in the past, with research-based standards and levels of performance that raise the bar across the board. As a result of this new lens, the landscape of teacher effectiveness will also change. Teachers and school leaders will have greater opportunities for constructive feedback about teaching and learning, focused on specific components of practice.

How can school leaders help teachers change existing mindsets that fear constructive criticism and feedback to mindsets that create school environments where professional learning for all is an expectation and teachers understand that you don't have to be bad to get better? This chapter will describe the process of implementing this change beginning with the leader's role in setting the stage for moving the staff forward. Just as there are certain qualities that enable leaders to remove their rose-colored glasses and view teaching through a clear, objective lens, leaders who are able to cultivate the ground and ready it for change approach this task armed with a set of beliefs and understandings about learning.

## **The Leader's Role: Essential Beliefs and Understandings**

### **Changing Beliefs: Practice Comes First!**

We all make choices about how to allocate our time. Most of us tend to spend more time in places and to do things that we are comfortable with, enjoy, or that have given us the greatest level of satisfaction in the past. Conversely, we tend to avoid or put off those tasks that appear overwhelming, stressful, or unpleasant. Leaders who bring successful teaching experiences to their role are more likely to be found in classrooms and engaged in professional conversations with teachers. This is where they are most comfortable and have seen the greatest impact in learning. They don't wait for an opportune moment to visit a classroom to listen in on what students are learning

make creating the culture of learning possible. Rather than try to convince teachers of the value of change and growth, successful leaders provide teachers with opportunities for short-term wins, enabling them to experience through practice and periodic feedback, the benefits of effective change. Leaders must also understand that learning happens when teachers are involved in doing the mental work, creating and developing ideas and strategies that are meaningful and relevant. Finally, teacher learning and growth occur in an environment that expects continuous learning and growth for all. You don't have to be bad to get better!

## Setting the Stage: Defining Who We Are

### Capturing the School's History

Creating the culture and establishing norms for teacher learning is the first step to improving teacher quality. What are some of the actions leaders can take to engage teachers in this culture of learning? One of the most important steps in leading change is to acknowledge and honor the contributions and experiences of the past. We've all experienced times when various stakeholders express feelings of "we've been there, done that" or bring skepticism or ill will to the initiative because of similar experiences they've had in the past that didn't turn out so well.

In their book, *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning*, Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (2001) describe a process for moving forward while honoring the past. Whenever I begin working with a new school or district, it is always based on the assumption that there are no blank slates, that we are not starting from scratch. No matter what the current state of affairs may be when changes are initiated, there are always practices, strategies, and traditions that are worth keeping. The "Historygram" process of Conzemius and O'Neill (2001, p. 29) is one that I've used many times when working with faculties about to embark on a new initiative, as a tool to build a bridge between the past and the future. It gives everyone in the school community an opportunity to reflect together in order to learn about the history of the school. The process evolves as a timeline that builds the organizational history through stories that are told by members of the school community beginning with the *tribal elders* and ending with the newly hired. Teachers learn about one another and begin to understand and respect differing points of view as they listen to their colleagues tell stories about past initiatives, major turning

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# 4

## The Wisdom of Instructional Practice

### What Teachers Need to Know

*The best teacher is the one who NEVER forgets what it is like to be a student. The best administrator is the one who NEVER forgets what it is like to be a teacher.*

Neila A. Connors (2000)

#### Playing a Guessing Game

When I was a teacher, I was driven by a set of beliefs, assumptions, and understandings about learning. I was guided by my belief that learners are motivated and engage when the work is meaningful, challenging, and relevant to them. I created an environment in my classroom where all students were encouraged to find their island of competence, a place where they felt confident and ready to participate in learning each and every day. I tried to get to know my students as learners, as well as people, inviting them to share personal anecdotes, accomplishments, and dreams for the future. I designed instruction by selecting materials, resources, and activities based on

Our post observation discussion revolved around the points I had asked her to focus on during our pre-observation. As a result, I was able to identify areas I wanted to improve upon. We had a great collegial conversation about my lesson which was guided by a common language and clear expectations. It was a team effort focused on my professional learning needs. I felt like I had a major role in my own professional development. (L.Courage, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

The conversation that took place between Lynda and her principal was the result of deliberate and intentional actions taken by both teacher and school leader. How does a leader set the stage for conversations that impact teaching to occur?

## Setting the Stage

### Acknowledging the Leader's Dual Role

What are the prerequisite conditions necessary for engaging in powerful conversations that improve teaching and learning? The first four chapters of this book have laid a foundation by presenting the essential conditions, knowledge, and skills that are needed by school leaders. These conditions set the stage for powerful conversations. In Chapter Two, we described the importance of establishing a culture for learning where all teachers expect that their teaching will be questioned and explored by colleagues and supervisors, not because there's anything wrong with their teaching, but because teaching is so complex that it requires continuous growth and change. We established, in Chapter Three, that successful school leaders possess essential understandings about teaching and learning and use certain skills to engage teachers in learning and continuous growth.

For conversations to reach their maximum potential, however, school leaders must also understand what Danielson (2009) calls the "dual nature" of leadership in professional organizations. That is, school leaders actually have two, somewhat conflicting roles to play. First, they have what can be referred to as hierarchical or positional authority over teachers. They make the decisions that impact teacher retention; they administer evaluations; they are considered *the boss*. On the other hand, school leaders also have the job of leading professionals, many of whom have experience and understanding that extends beyond that of their *boss*. Let's consider how the reality of this dual role impacts the way school leaders talk with teachers.