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# Introduction

It took me twelve years to do it. I was married in 1992, moved four times, renovated an entire house, and finally got up the nerve. To do what, you ask?

Skydive?

No.

Bungee jump?

Nope.

It took me twelve years to muster the nerve to bake a turkey—a whole turkey. I know it sounds silly. But the process really frightened me. I knew there were unsavory parts hiding out inside the cavity that needed to be removed before baking. How would I identify these mystery parts and what if I missed one and left it inside, thinking it was an ingrown wing or an extension of the neck? Then there was the tying up of the bird using some kind of string and an intricate lacing technique—pretty intimidating when Martha Stewart demonstrated it. Most importantly, how would I know when it was done? There were mathematical equations to utilize involving the weight of the bird and minutes per pound. And when piercing the thigh, the novice cook was warned to avoid touching bone, as this might give a false temperature reading. How would I know if the tip of the thermometer was touching a bone? I could just imagine the scorn of my dinner guests as they bit into their thigh meat to find it still raw inside.

Okay. I can hear you saying, “Come on, Cindy. Just bake the darn turkey and move on!” But that’s just the point. While this fear may sound ridiculous to many, it wasn’t to me. Though not mortal fear, these feelings were very real—real enough to keep me from ever hosting Thanksgiving dinner. I was afraid enough of being judged to avoid action.

Flash back with me now to 1975, to a day I’ll never erase from my memory. I was three years old, watching *The Price Is Right* with my mother and twelve-year-old sister, who was sick and home from school.

“I think I smell smoke,” my sister whispered.

This was all it took to eject my mother from her chair. She ran up the stairs and threw open the door to the first floor. “Fire!” we heard her scream out, as smoke billowed down the stairwell and began filling the room. Running upstairs in total panic, my sister left me—alone.

The scene is burned into my brain like a movie in slow motion. The force of the fire roared into the room like a freight train, overtaking all other sound. It was too late for me to try to climb the steep staircase, which I could only

scale by crawling up each step, one at a time. Within seconds, the room went black; I closed my eyes to keep out the burning smoke. Every breath scorched my throat and lungs. With my arms out in front of me, I felt my way to the television cart in the corner and crawled behind it, curling into a ball. At three years old, I was struck with the realization that I could die. Everything went numb.

This is certainly an example of mortal fear—fear that is strong enough to paralyze the mind. What I didn't state in my retelling is that there was an outside door downstairs in my house. You could get to it by walking through the clubroom, opening a door and walking through to the laundry room. So why didn't I try to escape using the door? All I can tell you is that when my senses were engulfed by fire, my logical brain shut off.

This is the nature of fear. It backs us into a corner like a bully and makes us accept defeat. Whether it's mortal fear (fear of physical harm) or emotional fear (fear of harm to the ego), this powerful feeling keeps us from taking the very actions that could improve our lives—or even save them.

In our personal lives, fear can wreak havoc on relationships with family and friends. It can keep us static, unwilling to try new things or participate in social opportunities and activities we enjoy.

In our professional lives, fear causes us to act in ways that are out of alignment with the worthy goals of public education. It diverts our attention and shifts our energy to areas that, in the long run, do not help students or teachers.

What has fear kept you from doing lately? What decisions have you made out of fear? For yourself? For your teachers? For your students?

Drawing from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, organizational development, and educational leadership, this book acknowledges the role that fear plays in schools across the country, analyzes why it is so powerful, and provides the steps to overcome it. In the following chapters, school leaders are shown how to make the fearless decisions to improve their schools. Throughout the text, Opportunities for Reflection are included to support positive change in thoughts, feelings, and professional action.

# 1

## The Power of Fear

After spending years in the field of education, I've come to the conclusion that there are two major causes of failing schools:

1. school leaders who aren't sure what to do in order to improve student achievement, and
2. school leaders who *know* what they *should* do, yet don't do it.

This is not to say there aren't other reasons for poor achievement. Low parent involvement, inequities in school funding, and high student mobility rates are just a few of the challenges that must be acknowledged. But the purpose here is to explore a larger issue that looms over the rest, one that has been given little attention within the field of education—and one that is within our control as leaders.

For over a decade, experts such as Michael Fullan, Doug Reeves, and Mike Schmoker have been very clear about what school leaders need to do in order to increase student achievement. But very little has changed in school improvement practices across the country as a result. In my experience (and I'm betting all across this country), stressed out and exhausted principals wrestle daily to make decisions and take actions that are in alignment with what they know is best for students.

For far too long, the educational community has ignored the elephant in the room—fear. Why? Well, it's just not easy conversation. In fact, it can be downright uncomfortable to talk about. But until we're willing to explore the emotional side of decision making and its impact on school improvement, the status quo will remain intact, and students will suffer. The intention of this book is to begin a much-needed dialogue about the power of fear, first internally with the reader and then within the professional community. Only then will there be a chance to increase understandings that have the power to change current school practices.



The scope of this book is broad, encompassing topics such as data-driven decision making, teacher evaluation, and increasing accountability—each of which could most certainly make up an entire book. This range, however, is purposeful and necessary, as the power of fear is palpable in every aspect of school leadership. It is my hope that this information will increase your daily awareness of the potential effects of fear on your decision making, and arm you with the vital understandings to rise above it to make fearless decisions for yourself and for students.

## Eyes Wide Open

Let's be honest—there aren't always external rewards awaiting those who make tough decisions. In fact, some systems unknowingly reward leaders who placate stakeholders at the expense of taking actions to improve student achievement. These are the leaders who may be beloved by their faculties and communities, but who are unable to substantially impact student learning. In many districts, the principal who begins to make difficult yet necessary changes is met with disapproval from teachers, students, parents, and superiors. We've all heard of the principal who is let go after too many stakeholders make formal complaints against him. This reality sets up an internal struggle that each school leader must face. Will I choose to be liked or to put student achievement first? Safety or risk? While the two paths aren't mutually exclusive, and in fact, will cross and intertwine over the course of a day, month, year, and career, one must choose which will provide the foundational value for action.

Until one is hoisted into the high-pressure role of school administrator, there is no way to comprehend the complexities and competing interests that assert themselves into the myriad of decisions made within the course of a day. It's easy for an observer to judge a school leader for decisions that seem to be made for the purposes of efficiency and peace in the faculty lounge. I know I did my share of judging while in the classroom. However, that ended when my first administration position began. By the end of my first week of crying kindergartners, complaining parents, voluminous paperwork, restrictive policies, tight budgets, and stressed out teachers, I completely empathized with all of my previous administrators and the decisions they had made. My eyes were opened to the realities of the role.

Still, deep down, I wanted to be different, to swim against the current mercilessly dragging me down, weakening my will. And I think school leaders across the country feel the same way.



## New Understandings About the Brain

The field of neuroscience is exploding with new discoveries, many of which have great implications for varied professions. Fields of study such as psychology, sales and marketing, criminal justice, politics, and business management have already begun capitalizing on this new knowledge. While the field of education has shown interest in brain science as it relates to student learning, it has not yet capitalized on the way it can impact school leadership practices. These understandings have the power to change the way we approach school reform.

Let's begin with the brain. We all have not one brain, but three. Neuroscientists have identified them as the old brain (otherwise known as the reptilian brain), the middle brain, and the new brain.

- ◆ The new brain thinks. It processes rational data.
- ◆ The middle brain feels. It processes emotions and gut feelings.
- ◆ The old brain decides. It takes into account the input from the other two brains, but the old brain is the actual trigger of decision. (Renvoise & Morin, 2007, p. 6)

According to neuroscientist Robert Ornstein, the old brain, located at the top of the spine, was the first to develop and is concerned with our survival. (Orstein & Thompson, 1991, p. 24) It makes sense that our fight-or-flight response is generated from here. And although the old brain "listens to" input from both our middle brain and our new brain, there is increasing evidence that the middle brain has more sway, causing our emotions to influence decisions more than rational thought. Information processed in the new brain, or cortex, is considered only through the emotional filter of the middle brain when a decision is made by the old brain. In *Emotionomics*, Dan Hill (2008) stated that the middle brain's "key activity is to assign gut-level value to the situations we encounter" (p. 17). Dr. Joseph LeDoux, a leading neuroscientist, said in *Emotional Brain* that the amygdale, which is found in the middle brain, "has a greater influence on the cortex [the new brain] than the cortex has on the amygdale, allowing emotional arousal to dominate and control thinking" (Renvoise & Morin, 2007, p. 8). Like Antonio Damasio stated in *Descartes' Error*, "We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think" (p. 16).

Marketing experts have understood this for quite some time, which is why advertising campaigns appeal to our emotions. A great example of this is the current campaign for Dove soap. Do their advertisements focus on how much cleaner you'll be if you use Dove soap? Or how much cheaper Dove

soap is in comparison to Ivory? No. Instead, their commercials and print ads focus on helping women (and now men) *feel* good about themselves. Their messages promote positive body image, which supports positive self-image. And everyone wants to buy a product that will make them feel safe and accepted, right? “Yes, at times people will analyze the ‘facts’ vigorously,” writes Hill (2008), “But emotions are basic and more dominant. Remember: we feel before we think, and those reactions are subconscious, immediate and inescapable” (p. 24).

## The Nature of Fear

Of all the emotions that influence us on a daily basis, negative emotions are the most powerful because “survival instincts dictate being more alert to hearing bad news than good news” (Hill, 2008, p. 49). Our old brain is always on the lookout for anything that might threaten us, either physically or psychologically. Logically then, “fear is the single most important emotion. . . . In fear’s basic script, we seek to escape some perceived danger in order to protect ourselves” (p. 51). In essence, when we feel fear, the mind is trying to alert us to impending pain—either physical or psychological, so we may change direction and avoid it or defend ourselves from it. This reaction is also known as the fight-or-flight response. When the situation is indeed dangerous, this old brain decision to battle or flee helps to ensure our survival. However, in many situations, this response is counterproductive. Psychologist and consultant Ken Hultman (1998) states that, “People often escape situations they should face, avoid opportunities that could help them learn, and attack people with whom they should be building alliances. . . . [the fight-or-flight response] does nothing to help us make something positive happen in our lives” (p. 16).

Fear is the elephant in the room. Fear grips us and disables us from making decisions that will move our schools forward. We must acknowledge its power and make it a part of our professional consideration and dialogue. How many of your decisions have been driven by fear?

At one point, a friend of mine in business management became so frightened of some of the controversial decisions confronting her at work, that she began calling in sick. She used this strategy to avoid heated meetings and appointments that she couldn’t face. Needless to say, the state of her department did not improve and problems that could have been solved early, ended up snowballing into much bigger issues.

Dan Hill’s (2008) review of the research shows us that fear causes cautious decision making where we are wary of the outcome. And at its worst, fear can make us freeze entirely, leaving us paralyzed (p. 29). This was certainly the