

Leading  
*School*  
Improvement

*A Framework for Action*

JOSEPH MURPHY



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## Introduction

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Most of my career has been spent working on the broad topic of school improvement and the place of school leaders in that work. While much of those efforts have found their way into academic books and journal articles, some of the work has been directed to colleagues in leadership roles in schools and school regions. In this book, I pull 14 of these practitioner-based articles into a cohesive narrative about leading school improvement. All of these pieces have been published over the past 20 years in outlets such as *Educational Leadership*, *Kappan* and *Principal*. They appeared as I engaged with an ongoing series of research projects. For example, chapter 12, the newest piece, comes from my work on caring leadership over the last five years.

The purpose of this volume is to bring the articles together to explain the larger storyline of leading school improvement – to pull separate planets together into a universe with a gravitational pull of principals nurturing school success. I attempt to achieve this integration in two ways. First, I weave important ideas (e.g. leadership values) across the various chapters. Common threads such as “academic press” and “care” are thus integrated into the larger narrative. Second, I cluster the articles to provide rich narratives on three overlapping issues that define the book.

The opening part of the book includes five chapters that unpack the concept of practice of leadership for principals, superintendents and other school leaders. The focus here is less on the specific actions that leaders need to undertake than it is on the principles and values that define excellence in leadership in schools. Energy is devoted to helping school leaders understand that personal characteristics (e.g. persistence and passion) and virtues (e.g. courage and integrity) count more than behavioural descriptors. Our core argument is that absent these foundational touchstones, meaningful school leadership is impossible to reach. And if meaningful leadership is not sustainable, then neither is substantive school improvement work.

The second part of the book helps readers develop a much richer and deeper understanding of school improvement than is the norm in educational literature.

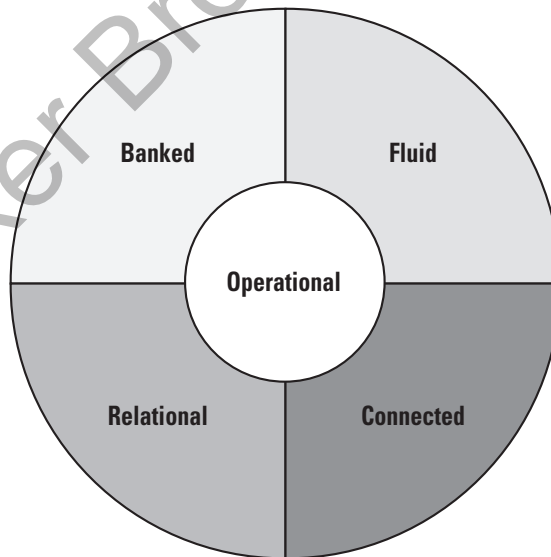
The essential point is the understanding that the entire school improvement building rests on two essential pillars: academic press and supportive culture. Developing this wisdom and learning how to employ it in the quest for school improvement is considerably more valuable than mastering specific behavioural skills. So also are informed understandings of how social, political and economic forces shape possibilities for school improvement. So too are deep understandings of what it means to lead in a community as opposed to a bureaucracy, a learning environment as opposed to a system of knowledge transmission, and a customer-oriented organisation as opposed to a public monopoly.

The final part of the book goes further. No longer content to see the interplay within each of the concepts of leadership and school improvement, we weave these two constructs together into a unifying frame for promoting school success. In short, we attack the issue of leadership *for* school improvement. The work again allows the reader to go backstage in this production to see how leaders should work on the two core issues of ramping up academic press and fostering a productive culture, strategies that carry the reader beyond ideas disconnected from the “self” of leadership and the “DNA” of school improvement.

# The Five Intelligences of Leadership

Over the last century, practitioners and academics have looked at leadership with multiple lenses. They have directed the spotlight of understanding on various dimensions of leadership (e.g. transformational leadership, moral leadership). They have also carved leadership into numerous components, resulting in the creation of assorted taxonomies and frameworks. In this chapter, I bring another perspective on leadership to life – what is called the intelligences of leadership. My assessment is that five intelligences comprise the DNA of leadership: banked intelligence, fluid intelligence, connected intelligence, relational intelligence and operational intelligence (see Figure 1.1). As you move through this chapter, I will discuss each concept in more detail.

**Figure 1.1** The Five Intelligences of Leadership



Go to [www.go.hbe.com](http://www.go.hbe.com) to download figures and tables.

## **Banked Intelligence**

Banked intelligence refers to the content knowledge essential to the task of leading – what academics refer to as crystallised intelligence. A good deal of banked intelligence is generic; it stretches across industries and positions. For example, we find here knowledge of strategies to resolve conflict effectively, successfully conduct a meeting or craft a productive strategic plan. Other banked knowledge is industry specific, in this case educationally anchored. For example, we find here knowledge of the laws on student rights. There is also job-specific banked knowledge (e.g. that needed to be an athletic director or an assistant principal of student affairs). Finally, some banked knowledge is context specific (e.g. leading Carringbush Secondary College in Carringbush, Victoria, during the current school year). Knowledge of their teacher contract or the politics of the community could be essential at another region. Building content assets is always a wise idea; but leaders need to be able to bring those assets to bear on specific challenges, opportunities and problems, as I will discuss further in this chapter.

## **Fluid Intelligence**

Fluid intelligence refers to the ability to think. That is, it is about the ability to puzzle through situations employing the banked knowledge at hand. The use of fluid intelligence is one of the essential ways that the need for new content knowledge is identified. Even more important, it is the main avenue through which oftentimes inert blocks of content are given meaning. For example, working through ways to bring a passively disengaged and lonely (or actively disengaged and hostile) secondary school student into the community will necessitate injecting life into content knowledge about pastoral care for adolescents. In this case, the subset of knowledge about student–adult relationships and creating authentic membership in school will need to be brought forth and thought through. Without fluid intelligence, banked knowledge can often sit in the vault untouched.

## **Connected Intelligence**

Connected intelligence is the art and science of bringing pieces of the work narrative together in productive ways. In a number of venues over the years, I have argued that, given the complexity and turbulent world of schooling, growing alignment and coherence is a cardinal aspect of school leadership. Such is the work of connected intelligence. An example will be helpful here. There is abundant evidence that units

(e.g. teachers, programs) and dimensions (e.g. budgets, goals) in schools often function as if they were in different galaxies. Working to craft all programs in a school around a particular point of view about student writing or a common perspective on student responsibility are illustrations of forging centres of gravity – that is, the use of connected intelligence.

## **Relational Intelligence**

Relational intelligence maps onto dimensions of more generalised theories of intelligence. More specifically, it aligns with two aspects of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence: the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Relational intelligence means possessing and testing a robust understanding of self in social context (i.e. in the school community writ large). Relational intelligence honours the mirror of reflection – the wisdom to see oneself as they are as defined by self and others and the acknowledgment, understanding and thoughtful examination of differences. In many ways, because this intelligence is profoundly personal and because many school leaders have learned the protective dysfunctionalities of denial, blame, withdrawal and justification, this is an especially difficult intelligence to master and polish over time.

Relational intelligence is also about understanding others. It is the cocktail of dispositions, knowledge and skills to work productively with people. We know that the great majority of principals' time is spent on interpersonal interactions. We also know historically that principals have failed most often when they lack relational intelligence. Understanding how to work in authentic ways with children, teachers and staff, and members of the extended community is difficult business. Even when it is in play, it is often pushed onto the margins by pressures to follow the thick binder of procedural guidance that directs schooling. Yet without relational intelligence, it is impossible for school leaders to succeed.

## **Operational Intelligence**

The fifth domain of leadership is operational intelligence, also known as the ability to make things happen effectively in schools and school regions. It depends on the possession of the other intelligences. Surprisingly, and quite inappropriately, it is often dismissed as “management” or “technical skills”. In reality, it is the knowledge to blend the various intelligences creatively and to positive effect in the face of work that needs doing and, of course, the ability to understand what work is required.



It is often seen in anemic form in schools in cases where one or more of the other intelligences are underdeveloped. For example, we sometimes see principals operationalising communities for teachers absent the relational intelligence required to make the work productive. In other cases, we see this work unfold without needed banked intelligence (i.e. the essential components of professional communities such as shared accountability and evidence-based collaborative work). On the other hand, operationalised intelligence emits a magical glow when it is in full bloom. Think of the primary principal who has navigated the shoals of addressing student needs by changing the assignments of teacher colleagues mid-term. Or the secondary school principal with the operational intelligence to successfully address a community crisis spawned by bullying in the school.

I acknowledge that there is an abundance of ways to think about leadership in general and school and regional leadership in particular. But I believe that the intelligences of leadership provide a powerful framework to capture the work of school administrators. It opens new possibilities for thinking about the work. Even more important, it provides an especially robust architecture for the analysis of that work, helping leaders understand why certain actions worked and why others did not and pinpointing where intelligences need to be enhanced. It privileges learning, analysis and action.