

# FROM LEADING to SUCCEEDING

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF  
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN  
EDUCATION

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# INTRODUCTION

I have about thirty seconds to persuade you that this book is different from the other thousands of books on the subject of leadership, but neither idol worship nor “ten easy steps” can make the critical connection between leadership and impact. What distinguishes this book is *connections*—the links between what leaders *aspire* to do and their actual *accomplishments*. It is not enough for leaders merely to *be*, as leadership descriptions suggest, and it is not enough for leaders merely to *do*. Rather, there are essential *elements* of leadership that represent a combination of who leaders are, what they do, and how they respond to the challenges before them.

The good news is that effective leadership is possible. It isn't the result of an innate set of mystical powers; it is, instead, a result of learning. The bad news is that effective leadership is rare. Annamarie Mann and Jim Harter (2016) of the *Gallup Business Journal* report that the vast majority of people regard their leaders as disengaged, uninformed, uncaring, and incompetent, and only 13 percent of employees worldwide report being fully engaged at work. Most employees would forgo a substantial raise to see their immediate supervisor sent to the gallows . . . or at least exiled from their workplace.

*From Leading to Succeeding* provides seven elements of leadership that, supported by an international body of evidence, are linked to better performance. But performance is not the typical litany of results, whether measured in quarterly earnings for business leaders or test scores for education leaders. *Leadership* in this context is about the elements that inextricably link leadership to impact.

The inspiration for the structure of this book is the classic text *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. First published in 1918, the book continues to be a reference for writers, from 21st century bloggers to their ink-stained predecessors. The term *element* is an interesting one, with definitions ranging from the casual,

merely a component of the larger body under observation, to the chemical, the basic building blocks of the universe. Human knowledge has progressed a good deal since Aristotle suggested that the world consisted of four basic elements—fire, water, air, and earth.

Similarly, the ancients wrote about leadership, and there remains a good deal to learn by studying older texts, including the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Christian Gospels, the Magna Carta, the Napoleonic Code, and the Declaration of Independence, to name just a few. While the intervening centuries have taught us a few things about leadership, some thinkers in each era have the conceit that they are the final arbiters of truth.

I make no such pretense. In this respect, I do not take as my model the soaring rhetoric of Gandhi, Churchill, or Franklin D. Roosevelt, but rather their rough drafts. For example, the best part of a tour of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, is not the newspaper headlines, the radio fireside chats, or the pictures showing the United States in recovery from the Great Depression and World War II. For me, it is the seldom noticed and underappreciated rough drafts of FDR's most famous speeches, the margins of which contain Roosevelt's handwritten amendments. Only later drafts of the first inaugural address of 1933 contain the phrase "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and the same is true of the phrase in his address to a shaken United States eight years later, "A date which will live in infamy."

These phrases, and many others like them, were not the product of an orator or writer who was singularly inspired, but rather of a team that moved and inspired the world. This is an apt metaphor for leadership. It is not the inspired word or exceptional action of a single charismatic person but the work of many, with credit often bestowed on the few. If this book has any value to the leaders who choose to read it, let it be as a reminder to check their egos at the door and remember the many who helped them to achieve their present measure of success.

The seven elements of leadership presented in this book include purpose, trust, focus, leverage, feedback, change, and sustainability. However, agreement with these elements is not essential to provoke important dialogue with colleagues about the nature and purpose of leadership. The book is designed for consumption in bite-sized chunks. For example, each chapter might serve as grist for study and discussion in a leadership meeting or part of a larger discussion within your professional learning community (PLC).

## The Elements of Leadership

I present the seven elements of leadership in a deliberate order. Without purpose and trust, the most brilliant execution is without a firm foundation. Without sustainability, the most ardent and well-intentioned leadership efforts will evaporate like the summer's dew. The elements are not a checklist of items to be completed, checked off, and forgotten. Sustainability governs decisions. If a suggestion is not consistent with the stated purpose of an organization, it is abandoned or revised. If an outcome will not or cannot last, we don't invest our time, energy, and resources.

The journey from leading to succeeding requires deliberation. We must allocate time and attention to actions that have the greatest impact on results and fulfill our purpose—now and in the future. If your idea of success is limited to quarterly earnings or annual test scores, then a different leadership book is more likely to meet your needs. If your idea of success is measured in lives changed long after your leadership tasks are completed, then I invite you to continue on this journey.

### *Purpose*

The first element of leadership is purpose. When leaders have a guiding purpose, members of the organization can sometimes forgive them for errors in execution. But without clarity of purpose, cynicism becomes the reigning emotion throughout the entire organization. The enduring success of Scott Adams's (1997) *Dilbert*, the cartoon that embodies organizational cynicism, is a testament to the prevalence of what one of the strip's characters famously calls "process pride." Popular initiatives (strategic planning and standards implementation, for example) often seem to favor elevation of process over purpose.

Before you convene your next meeting, make your next phone call, or write another task on your endless to-do list, ask the fundamental question, What is our purpose? In order to create a purpose-driven organization, leaders must also have deep and abiding passion for that purpose. Passion is what sustains leaders and followers. Passion demonstrates why the purpose is worthwhile and prevents leaders from compromising on the essentials of purpose. Leaders with passion behind their purpose can follow the advice of 17th century theologian Rupertus Meldenius, who wrote (originally in Latin and translated), "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity" (Cherok, 2015). Leaders with purpose know the essentials and convey them clearly and consistently throughout the organization without becoming dictators.

## *Trust*

The second element of leadership is trust. According to the American Psychological Association (2014), more than 50 percent of employees distrust their employers, and the level of disengagement among teachers, in particular, is at an all-time high (Riggs, 2013). How did this happen? I've worked with many educational leaders, and I don't know of a single one who aspired to be untrustworthy. Yet an astoundingly high number of them fall victim to the gap between rhetoric and reality. Their speeches at the beginning of the school year about how much they value teachers are quickly eclipsed by the absence of collaboration. Their promises of parental involvement are overshadowed by hierarchical decision making that leaves out a parental perspective. They contradict their commitment to mission and vision with bureaucratic processes that undermine their values. Trust is not about what leaders *say* but rather what they *do*.

## *Focus*

The third element of leadership is focus. Research on more than two thousand school plans reveals that schools with six or fewer priorities experience significantly higher gains in student achievement than the typical school with dozens of strategic priorities (Reeves, 2011). Fragmentation is even worse at the district level, where initiatives become an accumulation of the suggestions of every board member, political leader, grant provider, and teacher leader.

Considered individually, each suggestion has splendid potential. But piled on top of one another, these initiatives divert the energy, time, and money of the entire system. For example, PLCs are one of the most important and influential initiatives since the 1990s. Yet I have witnessed school leaders claim that "we are doing PLCs," only to discover that they simply changed the name of their faculty meeting (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Rather than the collaborative insights that lie at the heart of PLCs, the frantic, fragmented, and administrator-focused meetings continued as if no one had rearranged the chairs in the faculty meeting for years.

## *Leverage*

How does one decide where to focus? The fourth element of leadership is leverage, a systematic inquiry into the specific leadership actions associated with the greatest improvements in student results and organizational effectiveness.



John Hattie and Gregory C. R. Yates (2014) draw the essential distinction between the question, What works? and the more important question, What works best?

Going by the very low bar of statistical significance, just about anything works—that is, most interventions have a nonrandom relationship to student results. There is a significant research bias in favor of establishing significant relationships. However, scholars can better serve the world of education by honestly writing, “While this initiative might show statistically significant results, it has no practical significance. Time and energy devoted to this initiative would be better diverted to other, more useful efforts.”

For example, researchers have established that one of the highest-leverage strategies in education is nonfiction writing (Reeves, 2006a). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) encourage a significant increase in argumentative writing. This policy prescription is excellent but holds little value if teachers and administrators give it equal weight with everything else in the Common Core. Similarly, effective and accurate feedback has a disproportionate impact on student results. Teachers and administrators following the principle of leverage would therefore devote far more time to nonfiction writing and effective feedback than to other initiatives with less impact. Being statistically significant is not enough. Leverage requires school leaders to systematically analyze the return on investment of the time and resources teachers and education systems expend.

## *Feedback*

The fifth element of leadership is feedback. In no other area is there a greater divergence between evidence and practice. We know what effective feedback looks like—just watch a great music teacher or excellent athletic coach. Every student should receive immediate and specific feedback. Even the most casual observer can draw a relationship between effective feedback and improved performance. But in many classrooms, feedback has been reduced to telling students only if they are right or wrong, without specifics. If the music teacher shouts “Wrong note!” without explaining whether to sing higher or lower, louder or softer, or slower or faster, he or she can hardly expect improvement. Effective feedback depends on specificity.

We evaluate teachers with incomprehensible statistical models and encyclopedic checklists. We evaluate students with assessments that are only distantly linked to daily classroom practice and with grading policies that are inaccurate and unfair. We evaluate leaders at the end of their contracts, long after any coaching might

have improved their performance. Leaders who get everything else right but get feedback wrong run into a wall of demoralized opposition.

## *Change*

How can leaders improve trust, focus, leverage, and feedback? They must master the art of leading change, the sixth element of leadership. Change requires leaders to acknowledge that present practices are not working. While many leaders confess their need to change, it is still exceptionally difficult for them to directly answer the questions, What will you change? What is something that you control, over which you have personal influence, that you can do differently today?

Change leadership involves a challenging paradox. While governing boards hire leaders expecting the candidates to be agents of change, they quickly become disenchanted when the leaders do precisely that—engage in difficult but necessary change initiatives. One superintendent I admire very much, a close friend, has repeated this cycle five times: enter as the hero, achieve great results, and exit as the unpopular villain. Change leadership is not popular or a key to career security; it is essential.

## *Sustainability*

The seventh and final element of leadership is sustainability. The best leaders are known not only for what they achieve during their tenure but also for what endures long after they leave. *Julius Caesar* showed us that leadership transitions are tricky. As Shakespeare's rendition of Antony's funeral oration put it: "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interrèd with their bones" (Shakespeare, 3.2.75–76). Despite receiving one of the best funeral orations in the English language, Caesar's vision for Roman glory, and a history of successful conquests, the empire quickly descended into chaos.

Most leadership transitions in education are not quite as dramatic, but they certainly can be brutal, public, and destructive. Once an education system acquires the reputation of destroying its most recent leader, it becomes very difficult for that system to entice the best talent to join the leadership team. When the operating assumption of the new leader is that the ideas, values, and loyalties associated with the prior regime were unforgivably wrong, then today's Caesar quickly becomes tomorrow's Brutus, with the crowd changing its affections within moments.

Am I being overly dramatic? With the average tenure of urban superintendents a little more than three years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014), it is easy