

Key Competencies for Whole-System Change

LEADERSHIP

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Knowing You Are Not Alone

As complicated as things are these days in education, the pressures we face as educators pave the path for a radical new way. Some of these pressures arise from the growing realization that the system is wracked with weaknesses; however, positive pressures join these negative pressures and inspire the creation of a new system. This is actually a very good time to be an educational leader, to identify kindred spirits, and to cultivate and mobilize real leaders. Despite this, many high-performing leaders feel alone.

High-performing leaders have forged a path to success that is against the grain and counter to the practices of their colleagues. They have felt the need to keep quiet about what they believe is needed to improve the education process. Such leaders feel they are destined to be alone because the majority of regulators and political leaders will be critical of their practices or, even worse, try to stop them. However, these pioneers are everywhere in the United States and around the world

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challenging the status quo in education but often feeling alone in their pursuit. In this book, we show that great leaders are really not alone; they have a network of colleagues who might be described as *below the radar*. Their greatness as leaders can be brought to the surface.

Surprisingly, these below-the-radar groups of leaders actually share common competencies, practices, and traits that make them successful. While they often do not have formal forums to convene and uncover their common practices, they share common ground, creating an extraordinary resource to their profession.

In fact, these great educational leaders share common ground with breakthrough leaders in industry, health care, and the public sector. In this book, we explore some examples from leaders in other professions to help improve the field of educational leadership.

Achieving Simplicity and Focus

Simple can be harder than complex: you have to work hard to get your thinking clear to make something simple. Steve Jobs, cofounder, chairman, and former CEO of Apple, believed that the key to making a difference in the world was through simplicity (Jobs, n.d.).

If our legislators and policy leaders understood the power and elegance of making life easier and simpler for educators, we could move mountains for our schools and districts and, ultimately, for our students.

We must move now to train and support leaders to simplify and focus their attention to fight off distractions. The teachers, principals, and administrators who commit their life work to students deserve an environment that is not mired in the complexity of red tape, regulations, and inane processes for the simplest of issues when all they ever wanted to do was look into a student's eyes, see her potential, and help her realize her dreams.

Educators in the 21st century often do not enjoy their work. They feel blamed for society's problems, and they spend too little time with students and other educators making the dream of education a reality. What has happened with education? Why did it get so cumbersome, complex, and unmanageable? Can we stop new mandates and regulations, or do we have to learn how to cope with this world of education in a new way?

We would like to say there is a simple answer. However, the bureaucracy that education has become has so many contributing factors it would take this whole book to address them. Politicians go in and out of office, each one adding his or her own mark to fixing education with new laws. The departments of education internationally, nationally, and in the states or provinces have their own ever-changing ideas about why education is not working and proposed solutions. Corporations, universities, and a myriad of educational change organizations also add their two cents about solving education's problems. We might even say that educational consultants like us often muddy the waters with our analyses.

We could try forever to unravel who or what is at the root of the problem in education and how to stop it. However, that would defeat the purpose of this book, which is to achieve simplicity and focus.

When we started our quest to help educators simplify and focus, we did so by compiling examples of successful education leaders we knew or had worked with. We were amazed at how many we could identify. Yes, the decades since *A Nation at Risk* was published (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) have taken a toll on educators' energy, but at the same time, a growing number of leaders have had great success. It is these leaders—who have trumped the odds—who give us insight into how to achieve success, even under adverse circumstances. We can take advantage of this growing cadre of real leaders to identify insights and create new networks where good leaders working with other good leaders get even better.

This book tells the stories of how some district and school leaders have stopped the madness of the endless initiatives and mandates—the constant confusion and complexity—and simplified their world for the sake of their staff and students. It is hard work to focus your thinking amid the overload of demands. One must sort through complex, deep issues to make the world of education simple and powerful. We must think deeply about what our vision is for success and determine strategies and actions that we believe will move us to our goals and dreams for the future. Then, we must determine how we will know that our strategies are working and make quick course corrections to stay on track. This may sound complicated and cumbersome, but those who use the principles and strategies we identify in this book will find the way to make a difference.

Simplicity is the art and science of thinking, planning, and measuring our actions against the results we need to achieve. It is also about acting and learning as we go along. The best leaders commit to this reflection as a matter of course and relish the learning along the way. Mary Ann Jackman, former superintendent and a regional assistance director for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, states that to focus and simplify the work for underperforming districts, every school has to have a drumbeat. That drumbeat helps schools focus on and choose which initiatives and strategies will provide maximum impact for their desired results. She further explains that leaders should focus on three questions:

1. Is this the right initiative?
2. Is this the right time?
3. Is this the right intensity for implementation?

Mary Ann speaks of one high school that simplified and focused by examining its countless initiatives and decided to follow the drumbeat of vocabulary development and writing across the curriculum, which leveraged results for all subject areas (M. A. Jackman, personal communication, July 18, 2014).

Simplifying takes work, and it includes honoring the work of others and respecting the commitment they bring to the task. Maren Rocca Hunt, executive director of elementary education in Napa Valley Unified School District in California, notes that central office leaders must work as one unit—one cohesive team—and integrate their work to enable principals to do their best work for students (M. Rocca Hunt, personal communication, June 20, 2014).

This book provides our best thinking about how to make your life simple and meaningful as you meet the day-to-day challenges of educating students for our present and future world. A leader must simplify his or her work to allow the focus on results that everyone wants in his or her district or school. Once we decrease all the noise around us, we can focus our thinking and are thus less susceptible to the distractions that derail us from building great schools and districts. We believe that the road to success involves a combination of (1) using the right drivers for system success and (2) developing core competencies for continuous improvement.

Using the Right Drivers for System Success

The global stage of education has added to the complexity of education reform. The continuous pressure to turn around education is an obsession of policymakers. The United States, Australia, and a growing number of countries are trying to drive reform with better standards, assessments, monitoring, intervention, and teacher development. (By themselves, these are the *wrong policy drivers*, as we will address shortly.) Additionally, in some countries, such as the United States, the corporate community is pushing for results. Corporations are putting pressure on our education system to produce results and prepare students for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

By and large policymakers in the United States have misinterpreted the drive for results in the corporate world. There is a belief that improved education results can be achieved through accountability