

## *Introduction*

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Welcome to *Leadership 180: Daily Meditations on School Leadership!* I intend *Leadership 180* to make a significant and lasting difference in the practice of your leadership, the quality of your professional life, and the effectiveness of the school community with which you are engaged. This introduction provides a context for and an overview of this book's key features.

The number of essays included in this book was selected to match the 180 days found in the traditional school year. The number 180 also recognizes the possibility of a dramatic change in direction that can occur within leaders and school communities when leaders alter their beliefs, deepen their understanding of key ideas and practices, and develop new habits. Each topic addressed in this book was carefully selected because of its power to influence leaders' understanding and actions in ways that could make profound and permanent improvements in teaching, learning, and relationships in schools.

In recognition of the fast pace and intensity of school leaders' professional lives, the 180 brief essays contained here can be contemplated and actions taken in just a few minutes a day. The "meditations" can be read in any order, and I encourage you to dip into them to suit your interests and the challenges you are facing in your work that day. You will notice a repetition of a few topics as I circle back to them from different directions. These ideas, linked to the following foundational beliefs, are the core leadership practices that enable transformational change that begins with leaders and radiates from them throughout the organization.

### **I Believe . . .**

The inspiration for this book was drawn from "This I Believe," a popular and durable series of essays dating from the 1950s that found expression in newspaper columns, books, a website ([www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org)), and a long-running National Public Radio "Morning Edition" series.

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### *Learn Forever*

Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.

—Albert Einstein

Learning adds vitality and sense of purpose throughout the life span. Leaders' most important learning comes as they pursue important individual and collective goals. They adopt new beliefs, deepen their understanding of important ideas, experiment with new practices, and reflect on what they can learn from those experiences. Such relentless effort is particularly important for school leaders because their learning, purposefulness, and vitality affect the entire school community.

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*Today I will* take a few minutes to commit in writing to a professional learning goal that will stretch me and benefit the school community; I will mark dates on my calendar when I will review my progress. To increase my clarity and commitment, I will share the goal with a colleague.

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## *Learn Actively*

There is now a massive amount of evidence from all realms of science that unless individuals take a very active role in what it is that they're studying, unless they learn to ask questions, to do things hands on, to essentially recreate things in their own mind and transform them as is needed, the ideas just disappear.

—Howard Gardner

Leaders who stretch themselves through continuous learning stretch the communities they lead. Because learning literally changes the brain, it requires persistent effort and activity on the learner's part, whether the learner is an administrator, teacher, or student. Leaders alter their brains when they expend energy to deliberately develop new habits of mind and behavior through the creation of learning plans and the conscious rehearsal of new habits of mind and behavior until their brains have new "default settings." They also create new neural networks through the kind of sustained intellectual engagement found in the close reading of professional literature, extended writing, and focused conversation.

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*Today I will* engage deeply in a learning task that requires me to grapple with an idea or problem to make sense of it for myself. As part of that process, I will explain orally or in writing the meaning I have extracted through my effort.

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## ***Combine Research With Professional Judgment***

[T]eachers, schools, and districts should conduct their own informal (and formal) studies on how well an instructional strategy works in their particular context—with their students, their grade level, or their subject matter. No strategy is foolproof. No strategy is proven. You have to see how it works in your particular setting.

—Robert J. Marzano

Educational research loses much of its value if applied in mindless, formulaic ways to the complex problems of teaching and learning. Effective leaders appreciate the power of school context in shaping the use of new practices and engage teachers' professional judgment in applying research. Consequently, school communities incorporate informal and formal assessments into their improvement plans to determine whether a new practice is affecting student learning, and they modify the practice when appropriate to achieve the desired outcome.

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***Today I will*** clarify my viewpoint on the uses and abuses of educational research to make certain I understand and can clearly explain both its strengths and limitations.

# I55

## *Aim High*

The greater danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.

—Michelangelo

Effective leaders encourage school communities to aim high to achieve significant goals that benefit all students, goals that initially may seem impossible to realize. These leaders know that even if these stretch goals are not achieved, the progress made because of the deep changes they require will far exceed the results obtained through modest, incremental objectives. They also understand the importance of frequent celebrations to recognize indicators of progress in the achievement of the stretch goal.

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***Today I will*** carefully examine an important school goal for the trajectory of its aim—how it embodies high expectations for students and adults alike and benefits all students—and consider ways in which we have or will celebrate milestones of progress.