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CHAPTER 1

The Law of Initiative Fatigue

Why Leadership Focus Matters

THERE WAS ONCE a splendid school leader who had many laudable intentions. The leader produced many outstanding initiatives, each of which was supported by solid research showing that the ideas had worked in other school systems. Each initiative was accompanied by thoughtful implementation plans requiring detailed documentation and by supporting professional development seminars and workshops. After each new workshop, the leader adopted appropriate supervision techniques, sometimes accompanied by technology that produced rich data, reports, charts, and graphs. As the year progressed, the leader noticed that the wonderful enthusiasm among teachers and administrators at the beginning of the year was being displaced by fatigue, resignation, anger, and despair. After all of the promising initiatives and hard work, the only thing this leader did not have was the desired results.

The bad news is that this story is hardly unique. The research on which this book is based includes an analysis of leadership initiatives in more than 2,000 schools in the United States and Canada. This research reveals that *initiative fatigue* is a serious and growing problem. By “initiative fatigue” I mean the tendency of educational leaders and policymakers to mandate policies, procedures, and practices that must be implemented by teachers and school administrators, often with insufficient consideration of the time, resources, and emotional energy required to begin and sustain the initiatives. Even the sturdiest bridges have load limits for a reason, as they can bear thousands of tons of weight up to a limit, with trucks, trains, and cars all crossing the bridges without incident. Once the load limit is exceeded, however, even a small additional weight can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Requirements for new initiatives almost always begin with a reasonable response to information that suggests that schools can improve their performance. Educational leaders develop programs—often in response to demands from policymakers—to improve literacy, citizenship, professional development, student health, data analysis, or instructional technology, or, without a hint of irony, they institute mandatory training to reduce faculty stress and burnout. When examined individually, each of these ideas might have merit. But when viewed as the final car on an overloaded bridge, even the most reasonable mandate can be the cause of initiative fatigue.

The point of this book is not to attack or defend any individual programs, but rather to equip leaders and policymakers with a method for establishing and maintaining leadership focus. Therefore, it is essential to note that initiative fatigue is not the result of malicious or feckless leadership. Indeed, it is the zeal of school leaders to serve the interest of students, as well as a host of governmental mandates that were equally well intentioned, that has led inexorably to the overwhelming number of initiatives that plague schools. The central thesis of this book is that leadership focus is a prerequisite for every other element of leadership. Specifically, leadership focus has the following characteristics: impact, leverage, and implementation. Let us briefly consider each of these criteria.

IMPACT Leaders know that while perfection is elusive in educational research, we need not rely on guesswork or vendor claims. Hattie (2009) demonstrates convincingly in his examination of more than 800 meta-analyses including more than 83 million students that the claim that an initiative “works” is anemic and unpersuasive, because a comparison to “no impact” is a bar set so low that every initiative appears attractive. Impact worthy of leadership focus, he suggests, requires evidence that the benefit from a proposed initiative is significantly greater than the benefit that would arise from a continuation of present practice. Because 95% of interventions result in some gain in achievement, Hattie concludes, the criterion of “impact” must be more than “better than nothing.” It must surpass a benchmark of real-world change.

LEVERAGE Because there is invariably more demand than supply for the attention of leaders and teachers, leaders with focus choose

those few initiatives that have leverage, that is, an impact on multiple variables. For example, when schools increase their emphasis on nonfiction writing, the impact is visible not only in student literacy but also in student performance in math, science, and social studies (Reeves, 2002a). When teachers improve the accuracy, timeliness, and specificity of their feedback, it aids student learning in every endeavor (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2006). By contrast, leaders violate the principle of leverage when their response to lower science test scores is a flurry of science curriculum initiatives that divert time and attention from student literacy.

IMPLEMENTATION Leaders who are serious about implementation create a continuum of performance, including introduction, initiation, application, and capacity building. This range of implementation is not overwhelming in its complexity, but it is far more meaningful than a binary approach that compares one program with another, or that compares the presence of a program with the absence of a program. Most program evaluations take this either/or approach because the evaluations assume that the most important impact on achievement is the presence of an instructional program rather than the degree to which that program is implemented. However, our research demonstrates that it is not the mere presence of a program that influences student achievement, but rather the ability of educational leaders to assess the degree of implementation of instructional initiatives and then use that information to improve implementation at every level.

The Costs and Benefits of Focus

Without focus, even the best leadership ideas will fail, the most ideal research-based initiatives will fail, and the most self-sacrificing, earnest leaders will fail. Worst of all, without focus by educational leaders, students and teachers will fail.

Fortunately, there is good news as well. When school leaders find their focus, the rewards are rapid and significant. While focus alone is not a sufficient strategy for school improvement, focus is a prerequisite for improvement. Our multivariate analysis reveals that when focus is combined with other variables—such as effective monitoring, profes-

CHAPTER 4

From Theory to Real-World Impact

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER I discussed how a few key factors—focus, monitoring, and efficacy—combine to have exceptional impact on student achievement. Let us now turn our attention to research findings and practical applications for school leaders.

Impact on Student Achievement

While the full details of this study are provided in Appendix A, I list here some of the most striking conclusions about the relationship between focus and student achievement. (Levels of focus discussed here were measured according to the scoring rubric that appears in Appendix B, which is also available for free download at www.tcpress.com and www.LeadandLearn.com.)

- High-poverty schools (those with more than 80% of students categorized as economically disadvantaged) were somewhat more focused than the entire sample, but only 4% of high-poverty schools scored the highest rating on focus, while 30% were at the lowest level. It is no accident that program proliferation affects high-poverty schools, as they receive high levels of funding but invest those funds disproportionately in programs rather than practices.
- Schools with high proportions of second language students rarely showed high levels of focus, with only 2% of schools displaying the highest rating.

- Schools with disproportionately high levels of students eligible for special education services displayed the highest levels of focus, with 5% of schools achieving the highest rating. Unfortunately, 48% of these schools had the lowest level of focus.
- Reading scores were significantly influenced by a combination of high levels of focus and high levels of monitoring. The schools with the highest levels in those two variables achieved twice the gains in reading over 3 years as schools with the lowest levels in the same variables.
- Combinations of variables that excluded focus were inversely related to student achievement. This means that schools that had high scores on the 15-variable scale and were doing precisely as their policymaking jurisdictions required had lower scores in student achievement than did their counterparts that failed to be so compliant. This is a surprising and disturbing finding, so much so that I required our researchers to check the data twice. How could diligence and assiduity be repaid with poor performance? The answer, it turns out, is that without focus, even the most well-intentioned efforts can be counterproductive.
- Leaders must be wary and look behind acronyms. While they can be helpful as mnemonic devices, some of the items that acronyms help us to remember may actually distract from those that are the most important. In fact, acronyms are distinctly unhelpful and uneven in their impact on achievement. Who has not been to a data analysis seminar and heard the exhortation to create “SMART” goals? To my regret, I have parroted this conventional wisdom myself (Reeves, 2002c) and now I must, as researchers are obliged to do, confess error. While “S&M” goals probably will not make the headlines of many professional development conferences, the data reveal that specificity and measurability far outdistance the other elements of the SMART acronym with regard to their impact on student achievement. Indeed, the power of specificity is directly related to the focus variable, and we found that the magnitude of the impact of specificity on student achievement was profound—as much as 10 times greater gains in some subjects when specificity was high compared to when it was low.
- When the relative impact of all variables was evaluated by using factor analysis, focus emerged as having the highest relationship

to student achievement. This finding is entirely consistent with our earlier conclusions. While I am mindful of my own dictum that “life is multivariate,” it is also true that some variables are more important than others. Deutchman (2007) concluded that although many complex variables influence healthy weight loss, a few variables such as daily weigh-ins and group support are essential for most individuals. Clearly these practices do not eliminate the need for responsible diet and exercise, but when researchers consider the relative impact of many variables, a few emerge as essential. In the educational context, grading and assessment policies play a similar role. We can have great ideas in curriculum, teaching, and leadership, but without effective grading and assessment policies, even the best practices in curriculum, teaching, and leadership will be undercut (Reeves, 2008b).

Perhaps the best way to conceptualize factor analysis is as a constellation—some people look at the stars and see a random scatter of light; others look at the same stars and see Orion and the Big Dipper. Factor analysis is a technique that allows researchers to think about the relationships among variables in space, like stars in a constellation. Some of the variables tend to form patterns (constellations), or “factor” as the researcher looks at them from different perspectives (“rotations,” in the argot of factor analysis). When stars are clustered, a more meaningful relationship is suggested than when they are far apart—we can see the Big Dipper more easily than we can see more diffuse constellations. I acknowledge that factor analysis is properly used as a technique for theory generation and not for the drawing of conclusions (Kim & Mueller, 1978). At the very least, however, it provides a mechanism for understanding the relative relationship between independent variables (in this case, focus) and dependent variables (student achievement).

To this point I have addressed the question of “Why leadership focus?” by providing clear links between improved focus, monitoring, and efficacy and improved achievement. Now I will review each of the leadership practices that were evaluated in this study to measure their impact on student achievement. It was relative to this group of practices that the cluster of three emerged as having the strongest positive relationship to student success.

Leadership Practices Defined

The following paragraphs define the leadership characteristics that were considered in this study. None of them are without merit, but as we have seen, some are profoundly more influential than others. These leadership practices are defined in a detailed manner in Appendix B, where I also provide a rubric that describes performance of each on three different levels.

It is important to note that I am not offering value judgments about these characteristics. Each of the following sections details laudable goals for educational leaders. Who could possibly be against the leader's establishment of a comprehensive needs analysis or the creation of measurable goals? Any leader would be enthusiastic to commit to each of these objectives. But this enthusiasm is a trap, because the lowest score for each of the following practices results when they are applied with insufficient focus, which is the inevitable result of trying to employ too many programs simultaneously. A leader might make one of these a cornerstone of his or her school, but that adoption would need to be focused, monitored, and invested with a conviction of efficacy in order to be worthwhile.

Not every demand on educational leaders is equal. If we fail to meet the obligation for focus, then the result undermines many other laudable goals, which can be achieved only if leaders are able to distinguish the important from the urgent. When everything is important, then nothing is important. It is therefore no accident that the leaders of school systems with more than a million children score rock bottom in their ability to focus. The paradox is that their competing priorities are neither self-indulgent nor destructive. However, the cumulative effect of multiple priorities is a focus deficit, and the inevitable impact of this deficit is a series of diminishing returns. The following list is not intended to challenge the potential effectiveness of any of the individual practices or characteristics we measured, but it does illustrate the daily conflicts confronted by school leaders. Simply put, when they try to do everything that appears to be effective, the result is that the impact of their frenetic energy is dissipated and student achievement suffers. These practices were selected because we believed when we started the study that all of them have the capacity to highly impact student achievement and we were seeking to discover which ones are most important. Each