

The Learning Leader

"We can't do that in our school district."

"I don't have time to add that to my curriculum."

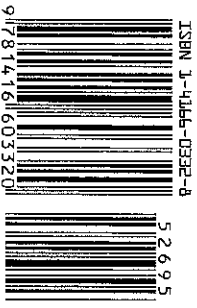
"We're fighting against impossible odds with these students."

Effective school leadership does not have to be a losing battle.

In *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, Douglas B. Reeves helps leadership teams go beyond excuses to capitalize on their strengths and reduce their weaknesses. He introduces the Leadership for Learning Framework, which challenges readers to consider that student achievement is more than a set of test scores. Reeves asserts that when leaders focus exclusively on results, they fail to measure and understand the importance of their own actions. Instead, he encourages leaders to use the Leadership for Learning Framework to look deeper into their results. The framework helps leaders distinguish between "lucky" educators, who achieve high results but don't understand their actions, and "Leading" educators, who achieve high results and understand how their actions influence their success.

From conducting strategic planning to evaluating projects to organizing leadership teams, *The Learning Leader* will help leaders reconceptualize their leadership role and motivate their colleagues. Reeves urges teachers and administrators to become more efficient and focused leaders, but most important, he charges them to be better educators for their students.

Douglas B. Reeves leads the Center for Performance Assessment, an international organization dedicated to improving student achievement and educational equity. He is the author of 19 books, including the best-selling *Accountability for Learning*.



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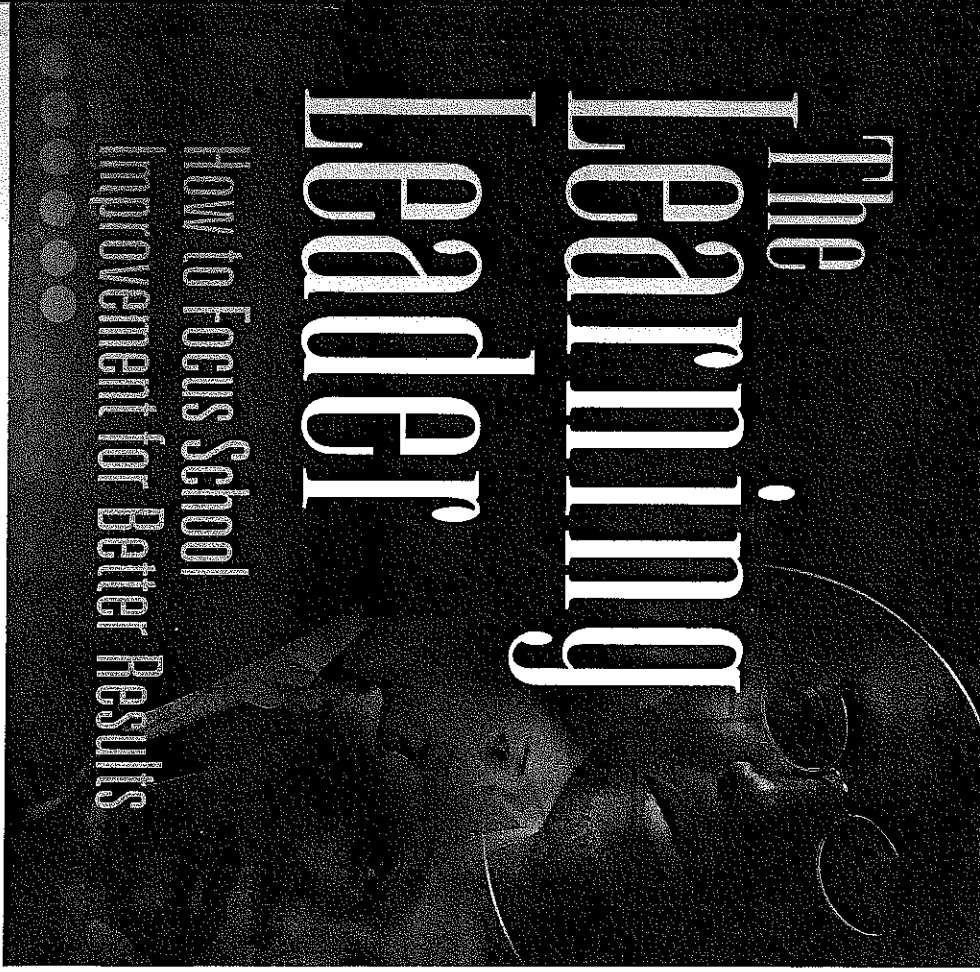
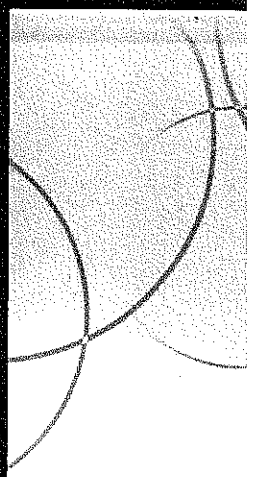
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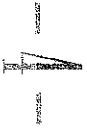
THE LEARNING LEADER REEVES

The Learning Leader

How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results

Douglas B. REEVES





The Dimensions of Leadership

The demands of leadership almost invariably exceed the capacity of a single person to meet the needs at hand. Even the most successful and iconic leaders of the past century—Churchill, Roosevelt, Mandela, Thatcher, Gandhi, and King—were not complete leaders. Although Churchill and King may go down in history as two of the 20th century's most successful communicative leaders, their performances as either analytical or relational leaders are undistinguished. Mandela and Gandhi were deeply reflective leaders, seeing their own place in the context of the struggles of millions, but neither showed distinction in systems leadership. In the context of education, many leaders seem less inclined to grasp the architectural vision of leadership that was posited in Chapter 3 and more likely to embrace the faux composite historical models in which the leader is simultaneously the great communicator, analyst, and a master of reflection. From such mythology are born the unrealistic expectations of communities, colleagues, and leaders themselves. Even the best of the lot frequently think of themselves as a failure because of their inability to attend three events simultaneously.

This chapter is not about identifying leadership failures or destroying historical figures. Rather, the focus of this chapter is to explain the dimensions of leadership in a way that allows leaders to capitalize on their strengths and take a complementary approach to their weaknesses. We need not fantasize about Churchill's missing analytical skills or engage in fruitless presumption that Gandhi was a master of systems thinking in order to appreciate their exceptional leadership qualities. Similarly, leaders with prodigious analytical and confrontational talents have made enormous contributions to government, education, and business, even though those leaders lacked abilities in communication and introspection. Great leaders are not mythological composites of every dimension of leadership. Instead they have self-confidence, and without hubris they acknowledge their deficiencies and fill their subordinate ranks not with lackeys but with exceptional leaders who bring complementary strengths to the organization.

The dimensions of leadership in the following paragraphs represent a wide range of leadership characteristics and skills. A good case can be made that these complementary dimensions are particularly important for educational leaders. Although these dimensions can form the basis for thoughtful self-assessment and organizational evaluations of leaders, such assessments must be used with care. A deficiency in one dimension of leadership is not necessarily a prescription for improving that apparent failing, but rather a suggestion that the leadership team should be broadened to include complementary dimensions. Unfortunately, the vast majority of contemporary leadership evaluations fall into one of two extremes, either omitting many of these dimensions or including all of them in a fruitless pursuit of perfection. In one recent study, we found that almost 20 percent of educational leaders had never been evaluated in their current position,

and more than half of the remaining 80 percent received evaluations that were ambiguous, inconsistent, and unrelated to their most important responsibilities (Reeves, 2004c). The dimensions of leadership are neither a checklist of things to accomplish nor a scale of perfection against which leaders measure themselves. Rather, these dimensions describe components of leadership that are necessary in every leadership team, but rarely present in a single leader. Leaders need not, indeed they cannot, be every dimension themselves, but they can and must ensure that every leadership dimension is provided by some member of the leadership team.

Visionary Leadership

"The last thing IBM needs right now is a vision." Louis Gerstner (2002, p. 68) famously said this at the beginning of his turnaround at IBM. Gerstner, credited with saving IBM from oblivion, clearly had run out of patience with traditional strategic planning and "visioning" exercises. The leader, faced with a crisis, needed to make some profoundly important decisions about products, markets, and people, and then he had to flawlessly execute those decisions. Gerstner's implication was that the concept of creating a vision was a squishy relic of the last century, when favorable economic conditions allowed leaders to indulge in such frivolities. Gerstner relented, however, and acknowledged the need for a dramatic change in vision for IBM. Without this profound change in direction, the company might have joined others on the technology scrap heap. The first obligations of leadership are articulating a compelling vision and linking clear standards of action that will accomplish the vision. This approach applies to tasks small and large, from respecting the time of colleagues by

starting and ending meetings on time to keeping commitments and meeting goals. Success is not an ephemeral concept, but it is clearly described. Every team member knows every day what the word "success" means and how it has been achieved.

Visionary leaders are not grandiose, as their visions are more likely to be the blueprints of the architect than the uncertain and cloudy visions of the dreamer. Great visionary leaders challenge the status quo with terminology that is clear and vivid. Perhaps half of the readers of this book remember the Berlin Wall, the dividing line between the Communists of the East and the promising democracies of the West. When President Reagan encouraged his Soviet counterpart to "Tear down this wall!" it was a vision that few had conceived since the end of World War II, yet within years it was realized. In earlier generations Thomas Paine and the anonymous authors of *The Federalist Papers* created a vision not as a skeleton, but as a living and breathing democracy, equipped with bones, muscle, sinew, and flesh. Centuries earlier, the authors of *The Magna Carta* envisioned a world of laws, and both Hammurabi in the ancient East and Hebrew schools in the ancient West believed that a society based upon justice, mercy, and walking humbly with one's god (Micah 6:8) would survive long past those societies whose gods were rife with covetousness, greed, and self-aggrandizement.

By definition, vision contemplates the future, and the future inevitably involves uncertainty, change, and fear. Therefore, visions that are fuzzy and described in a haze of mystic reassurance have a counterproductive effect. "My vision is of infinite possibilities, global expansion, and unlimited horizons," the leader claims. "But what does that mean?" followers inevitably ask. Unfortunately, the foot soldiers who are supposed to be inspired by a vision rarely express their doubts in a manner that reaches senior leadership. As a result, vision

statements, like many traditional strategic planning processes, remain a fiction of the executive suite and have little practical importance outside the confines of the annual offsite retreat, where leaders are safely isolated from organizational realities. Indeed, I would question the excessive formality and awkward phrasing that committees bring to vision statements. The cynicism that abounds in organizations, with few employees trusting their leaders, frequently stems from the gulf between the ordinary details of daily organizational life and the earnest protestations of leaders as seen in vision statements (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, 2003a, 2003b).

The organization need not be this way. Leaders can use vision to build trust rather than break it if they are willing to let their rhetoric give way to reality and allow their vision to become a blueprint rather than public relations baloney. Effective visions help individuals understand that they are part of a larger world and also reassure them of their individual importance to the organization. Equipped with an effective vision, the leader can respond in a consistent and coherent way to these questions:

- Where are we headed as an organization this year?
- Where will we be three to five years from now?
- What parts of our organization will be the same, and what will change?
- Will there still be a place for me in the future?
- How will my work change?
- What will I need to learn in order to be more valuable to the organization in the future?
- Why will I still want to be a part of this organization in the future?

The answers to these questions are personal and are communicated in dozens of moments of truth and in informal contacts between leaders and colleagues throughout the year. Formal annual reports and after-dinner speeches may address these issues in a general way, but vision must be communicated by leaders throughout the organization in personal encounters. Some visions in educational organizations are decidedly scary, particularly for people who may feel that their skills and abilities are not part of the leader's vision.

Consider this statement: "We will be a learning organization, using cutting edge technology to deliver world-class educational opportunities for our students." What does that mean to the literature teacher who associates computers with plagiarism, fragmentary speech patterns, and emotional isolation? What does that mean to the finance clerk and personnel specialists who have seen a growing workload with no increases in staff? While technology will play a role in the vision of most organizations, there is a better way to communicate the impact and meaning of that vision. As an alternative to the formal vision statement, consider this conversation:

Jean, you've got a great future here. Your integrity and work ethic are terrific, and the way that you collaborate with your colleagues is a real model for others. You've probably noticed that we're using a lot more technology now than when you first came here, and I see us moving in that direction in the future. Technology will never replace human intelligence and creativity, but we've got to use every technology tool we can, including some new ones that neither one of us has learned yet, to serve our stakeholders. With your abilities and advanced technology, I can see you doing great things in the future. I'd like to support you in some professional development to build your technology skills. What do you think about it?

Visionary leadership, in sum, may include the big picture, but it is insufficient for giving meaning and substance to a vision. Commitment depends upon knowing one's personal role in the vision and seeing a clear path to how to get there.

Relational Leadership

When talk turns to human relationships and emotional intelligence in some leadership circles, eye rolling and finger tapping are the most obvious signs of impatience with the soft side of organizational life. There has been a great deal of uninformed blather written and said about these subjects, and some of it is not only wrong but destructive. In education in particular, the presumption that self-esteem is a characteristic to be nurtured and developed in students and adults has morphed into a justification for narcissism, insulating people from honest feedback that is necessary for improved performance. In an important article entitled "Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth," Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2004) concluded after a review of multiple studies, "We have found little to indicate that indiscriminately promoting self-esteem in today's children or adults, just for being themselves, offers society any compensatory benefits beyond the seductive pleasure it brings to those engaged in the exercise." These are hard words indeed for educational leaders who have been force-fed a gospel that says high self-esteem is the root of success and low self-esteem is the root of problems ranging from employee disengagement to teenage drug abuse. This conclusion might be welcome news for pathological jerks who have been complaining for years that faculty meetings are not group therapy, administrators are not therapists, and the workplace is not your

family. "The firings will continue," they might add, "until morale improves." Surely there is a middle ground between leadership by Barney the dinosaur and leadership by Atrila the Hun. Relational leadership does not depend on false affirmations provided in vain attempts to build the self-esteem of subordinates, but rather on the trust and integrity that are at the foundation of any enduring relationship.

Interestingly, the foremost expert on emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman, makes the case for relational leadership in strikingly cold and analytical terms. Citing a mountain of research including long-term longitudinal studies of organizational effectiveness, Goleman and colleagues (2002) conclude that relationship skills account for nearly three times as much impact on organizational performance as analytical skills do. Casciaro and Lobo (2005) found that those who lack relationship skills, the "competent jerks" in the words of the researchers, have negative influences on the organization despite their technical prowess, because so few people in the organization can stand to work with them. Kouzes and Posner (2000, 2003a, 2003b) find that in studies of more than 1 million leaders, the trust and credibility that stem from meaningful relationships are essential for leadership success. Researchers differ on how to approach the challenges of emotional intelligence and relational leadership. Some, like Goleman, assert vigorously that specific relationship skills can be taught and learned. Others differ, asserting that someone with good relationship skills can likely be taught technical skills, whereas someone deficient in relationship skills will likely have some difficulty learning the nuances and intuitive practices that are associated with building and maintaining successful relationships. In other words, you can send a jerk to charm school, but at the end of the day, he's still a jerk.

Tolerating jerks and a climate of incivility has a tangible as well as emotional cost. Gardiner Morse (2005) suggests that the costs of uncivil climates, including time wasted avoiding malcontents, worrying about their actions, and, worst of all, looking for other jobs, could exceed \$50,000 per employee per year across all industries in the United States. An astonishing amount of turnover, which creates huge costs in training, lowers productivity, and creates poorer service quality, is due to people leaving toxic work environments. What can relational leaders do? You might want to listen to your own colleagues describe the elements of the effective relational leader, but the following list is a good start: listening without interruption or judgment, respect for confidentiality, and genuine empathy achieved through deliberate inquiry.

Relational leaders listen to their colleagues *without interrupting or prejudging* their statements. Tape a meeting or phone call with a subordinate and confront the data. How many times did each of you speak? Interrupt? Ask for clarification before coming to a judgment? Leaders frequently ascend to their positions because they are good communicators, or at least it appears that way. They make wonderful presentations to community groups and governing boards. When they talk to colleagues, they do so with conviction and enthusiasm. They are accustomed to hearing applause rather than questions and challenges. They are far more comfortable “communicating” through talking rather than listening. When senior leaders experience decades of positive reinforcement for such one-sided communication, it is little wonder that so few leaders understand the value of listening. Every leader needs a Nathan, the only member of King David’s entourage who was willing to publicly confront the king when he was wrong.

Relational leaders respect confidences, never betraying a secret or private conversation. The only exceptions are when the leader has a legal obligation to reveal a confidential conversation, such as when there are allegations of child abuse, employee harassment, or other illegal activities.

Relational leaders practice empathy through deliberate inquiry. They don’t say, “I know just how you feel,” because, in fact, they do not know how others feel. Recognizing this, relational leaders ask their colleagues directly about what gives them great joy and what causes them heartache. They follow the advice of Marcus Buckingham (2005b) and provide the unique attention, feedback, and support that each colleague needs. Some employees need to be heard in a one to one setting, while others would be nervous and feel put on the spot in such an environment. Some colleagues would appreciate recognition before a group, while others would find the attention embarrassing and threatening to their peer relationships. Some employees appreciate recognition for their daily technical expertise, while others prefer recognition that is rare, unusual, and reserved for exceptional performance. Unskilled relational leaders presume that the rest of the world is a reflection of themselves, and they motivate, reward, and communicate in the way that reflects their own preferences. If they are comfortable with technical jargon, they pour it on their colleagues, presuming that people are impressed rather than bewildered by it. If they find financial rewards motivating, they presume that colleagues should be grateful for a raise or improvement in benefits, despite evidence that their colleagues find personal appreciation more rewarding. If relational leaders organize their lives in bullet points sent through e-mail, they communicate that way, even if they discover that some colleagues prefer rich and

vivid descriptions of expectations rather than bullet points that strike them as brusque and demeaning.

Some leadership literature states that using relational practices is situational: appropriate when things are going well but out of line in times of high anxiety. Some experts argue that high degrees of direction and a commanding presence are required for an organizational turnaround (Goleman, 2000; Hersey, 1985; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). There is little evidence, however, that chameleons make great leaders or, for that matter, that leaders are capable of transforming their personal preferences in communication and management style as organizational life changes. On the contrary, when the going is particularly tough, budgets are cut, layoffs are imminent, public scrutiny is high, and the pressure seems nearly unbearable, then the skills of the relational leader are particularly important. This is especially true in education, where more than 80 percent of teachers leaving highly challenging schools reported that a higher salary would not have kept them there (Johnson & Duffett, 2003). In organizations of all types, public and private, large and small, for-profit and nonprofit, relationships—particularly with leaders—are one of the single greatest predictors of employee performance, satisfaction, and turnover (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999).

Relational leaders exhibit genuine passion for their mission and the people around them. When does the turnaround leader have time for passion? The direct answer is every single day. Passion, respect, civility, and gentility require not only time but genuine interest. In the midst of the most hectic organizational turnaround, babies will be born, relatives will fall ill, couples will become engaged, and couples will break up. In other words, the emotional lives of colleagues will continue whether or not the organization recognizes that there is life outside of work. The leader with relational intelligence stops—with

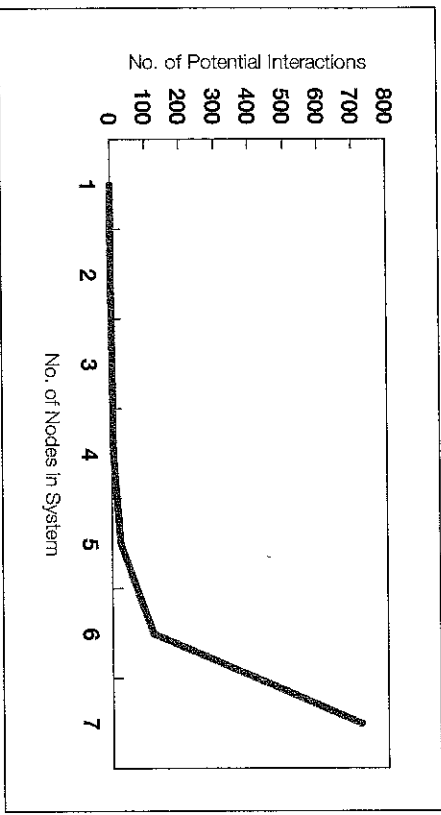
surprising alacrity—to divert attention from the organization to the person, to transfer attention from the ensemble to the soloist. While passion does not appear on the balance sheet, it is surely the asset that matters most for leaders and followers alike, and passion is most wisely invested by leaders in human relationships.

Systems Leadership

In my discussion of Leadership Maps later in Chapters 8 and 9, I refer to the dots marking the intersection of performance and leadership decisions as “nodes,” a term chosen because of its association with the science of networks. Nodes represent complex connections, and understanding these complex interactions is at the heart of systems thinking. With the addition of a single variable (team member, supplier, creditor, customer, patient, service provider, student, investor, or interest groups), the number of systematic interactions increases exponentially. In fact, we can plot the relationship between the increase in nodes and system complexity as shown in Figure 4.1.

This chart reflects the potential complexity for only seven nodes, but consider the interactions for which most leaders are responsible. You could list a couple dozen and not depart from the confines of the instructional staff of a school. But systems leaders also understand how bus drivers, administrative support staff, cafeteria workers, finance specialists, and a host of other people influence student achievement and core organizational objectives. They know, for example, that bus drivers who understand and apply lessons on student motivation and discipline will deliver students to school on time, safely, and ready to learn. Systems leaders know that an error by a finance clerk who is right 99.5 percent of the time can destroy the morale and effectiveness

4.1 — The Complexity of Systems Leadership



of five classroom teachers in a district with 1,000 employees. What is the level of complexity if the leader considers only 20 nodes and their possible interactions? Consider Figure 4.2. The first column lists the number of nodes, and the second column lists the number of interactions, calculated by the quantity of nodes minus one, and that number is multiplied by each smaller number in the number system down to 1. For example, in a network of three nodes, there are two potential interactions (3 minus 1 = 2, and 2 multiplied by 1 = 2). In a network of four nodes, there are six potential interactions (4 minus 1 = 3, and 3 times 2 times 1 = 6). With just a few more nodes, the complexity is staggering.

Although all interactions are not equally important, there are far more interactions than many leaders acknowledge. Only a handful of school leaders, for example, require central office departments to post and share data in a transparent manner with the same diligence that is required of schools. When they do, the community sees, for

4.2 — Complexity Beyond Seven Nodes

Number of Nodes	Potential Interactions
1	0
2	1
3	2
4	6
5	24
6	120
7	720
8	5,040
9	40,320
10	362,880
11	3,628,800
12	39,916,800
13	479,001,600
14	6,227,020,800
15	87,178,291,200
16	1,307,674,368,000
17	20,922,789,888,000
18	355,887,428,096,000
19	6,402,373,705,728,000
20	121,645,100,408,832,000

example, how energy savings, food service quality, bus safety, and the talent pipeline provided by the human resources department all contribute to the mission of the organization. The leader with systems intelligence must take the time to understand each interaction and its impact on the entire system, and then communicate this complexity in a manner that enables each member of the organization to understand and consistently use these important interconnections. This practice recalls the concept of the leader as architect who is able to make complex connections and master thousands of details in blueprints, yet build a temple that is masterful in conception and design and elegant in the simplicity of its steps, columns, and roof.

Thus systems leadership is not merely about complexity but about an even greater challenge: simplicity. This book is not the forum for a

rant on the irrelevance of many graduate school leadership programs, though Levine and his colleagues (2005) have given us a splendid and long overdue start. Equipped with many advanced degrees and years of bad intellectual habits from writing dissertations, the graduates of educational leadership programs are sometimes skilled at rendering simple subjects complex, substituting jargon for plain speech. It is far more difficult to take something that is complex, such as systems leadership, and make it simple. For example, despite the apparent overwhelming complexity in Figure 4.2, network connections can be surprisingly direct.

This idea is at the heart of the theory of Six Degrees of Separation, which was popularized by a Broadway play but is in fact based on experiments performed by psychology professor Stanley Milgram at Harvard almost 40 years ago. Using humans as a network and selecting what seemed to Milgram to be locations galaxies apart, Kansas and Massachusetts, the researchers sent letters to randomly selected people in Wichita and asked them to forward the letter to someone they knew “on a first name basis” who might know the target person in Cambridge. The participants’ packets were equipped with 200 forwarding letters, based on the best estimate of the number of forwarded mailings that would be required to make the journey. The average number of actual times that letters were forwarded: 5.5. Though the Broadway play mischaracterized the research to suggest that everyone in the world is separated by only six people, and Milgram’s research has been challenged on many counts, more contemporary reviews suggest that even in the most complex of network interactions (Barabási, 2003), six degrees of separation may be eerily close to the mark.

Before I was acquainted with the Milgram and Barabási research, I had postulated the Rule of Six (Reeves, 2002a) as my best estimate of the maximum number of priorities on which a leader could focus,

noting that those who claimed to have dozens of “priorities” in fact had none. Because every leader has far more than half a dozen people, tasks, projects, and constituencies all clamoring for priority treatment, the task of the systems leader is to know which of those competing factors have the greatest leverage. For example, we will learn later that some elements of teachers’ professional practices, such as focusing on nonfiction writing and immediate feedback, have a disproportionate impact on student achievement across a wide variety of subjects.

Therefore, while it is folly for a leader to claim to monitor all effective teaching practices, it is malfeasance to abdicate the responsibility and monitor none of them. The pilot of the small private airplane in which I am now flying has 29 gauges in front of him—I just counted—along with a radar screen, navigation equipment, and a bank of radios. While he may conduct an occasional instrument scan, as pilots are trained to do, he focuses most of his attention on this particularly turbulent flight on his attitude indicator, compass, and altimeter. When we are in the clouds and have no external visual references, we need to know if we are flying right side up, in the right direction, at the altitude where we promised the air traffic controller we would be, and safely away from other aircraft. The pilot also keeps an eye on the gas and oil pressure, and before landing, he also will check the light that confirms our landing gear has been deployed. The other gauges may be interesting, but even in perfect weather they do not command the attention of the pilot as much as those six indicators. An educational leader faces an array of information that is at least as complex as that faced by the pilot, in conditions that can seem even stormier on a good day. Systems leaders know the six indicators to watch, the nodes in their network with the greatest leverage, and the warning signs that will help them avoid catastrophe and eventually travel safely to their destination.

Reflective Leadership

Adrenaline is not enough for the long-term systemic changes that effective leaders must create. New leaders typically bring with them the benefit of the doubt and at least a brief honeymoon, while the circumstances that decided to offer the leader the job all hope that their bet was correct. Emotional intensity, commitment to a vision, goodwill, and sheer intensity can sustain the performance of leaders, athletes, and fugitives for only so long. Every marathon runner knows that while emotions are important, in the long run, it is preparation, monitoring signals, and making midcourse corrections and occasional changes in pace that are essential not only for victory but for simply finishing the race. After a couple of marathons, mountain ascents, and many leadership endeavors, I have learned that during the course of any major initiative, the leadership team must stop, take stock, and impose order on chaos. This deliberate approach includes the celebration of short-term milestones (“One mile down, just 25 to go!”), analysis of disappointments (“If the weather doesn’t change within 20 minutes, we will need to abandon the climb”), and an intensive reflection on lessons learned (“The price of hydration is planning for pit stops”).

Reflective leadership is rarely among the characteristics associated with the mythological leaders who never recognize obstacles or consider retreat, and always seem to win through sheer guts and determination. Myth yields to history, however, and reflection trumps bravado. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough in his brilliant book *1776* (2005) reminds us that, though George Washington was undeniably heroic and brave, his most decisive move during the Revolutionary War involved the safe retreat from New York. The colonists’ extraordinary victory in Boston was achieved with hardly a shot being fired, as stealth, positioning, and intelligence led

the British to sail out of Boston Harbor in haste, after having enjoyed domination of the town with naval and land forces that had been superior to those in rebellion. Likewise, Winston Churchill recognized obstacles and responded to them with strategy rather than bravado. While Churchill (1974) is justly famed for his oratorical encouragement to victory and unwillingness to give in to the enemy—“Never, never, never”—the historical record shows that one of the decisive moves early in World War II was the 1940 evacuation of Dunkirk. Without this strategic retreat, the D-Day offensive in June of 1944 may never have happened. Both Washington and Churchill, it turns out, had extensive experience with the values of waiting, being silent, retreating, and executing circuitous routes to victory, as historians Joseph Ellis (2004) and Roy Jenkins (2001) have documented in detail. Indeed, even a mythological hero such as Odysseus had years of reflection for every moment of victory.

Reflective leaders take time to think about the lessons learned, record their small wins and setbacks, document conflicts between values and practice, identify the difference between idiosyncratic behavior and long-term pathologies, and notice trends that emerge over time. Kathy Whitmire, former mayor of Houston and president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, encourages leaders to reflect on their proud moments. “Don’t stop after naming the first three or four obvious accomplishments or joys of your life,” Whitmire counsels. “Continue until you have named two dozen sources of pride, or more. Then review the list to see what values come up again and again, and you will see a pattern begin to emerge” (Whitmire, 2005). One particularly interesting tool is the *10+ Journal* published by Because Time Flies (<http://www.journal10.com>). The unusual format of this journal lists the same day of the year on 1/10th of a page, so that the reflective leader can observe many years of observations on the same

date. Another leadership journal (Reeves, 2002a) asks the leader to focus on these essential questions:

- What did you learn today?
- Whom did you nurture today?
- What difficult issue did you confront today?
- What is your most important challenge right now?
- What did you do today to make progress on your most important challenge?

Reflection is so important for leaders because of the gulf between the theoretical abstractions of academic leadership development programs and the daily lives of leaders. Indeed, one of the nation's premier leadership training organizations, the Center for Creative Leadership, acknowledges that "people do not develop the capacity for leadership without being in the throes of the challenge of leadership work." Participating in leadership roles and processes is often the very source of the challenge needed for leadership development. Leadership roles and processes are full of novelty, difficulty, conflict, and disappointments. In other words, leadership itself is a development challenge.

Leading is, in and of itself, leading by doing (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). Noel Tichy, one of the foremost leadership experts who has considered leadership in multiple contexts, including academic, business, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations, encourages leaders to literally write their leadership story. "Stories are a powerful tool for engaging people emotionally and intellectually and for leading them into the future," Tichy says. "Successful leaders must have reachable points of view about ideas, values, energy and edge. It is through stories, however, that they tie them together and teach and energize others to move from the present into a winning future" (Tichy & Cohen, 1997, p. 42).

A leadership journal need not require an exceptional commitment of time nor must it become a maudlin exercise in therapeutic self-revelation. Objective statements, such as those in response to the questions noted above, can seem mundane in isolation, but they are quite revealing over time. Although journaling is, in general, an intensely private activity, the reflective leader knows when personal revelation can have a profound impact. In my own case, some of my toughest leadership decisions have been prompted by a review of journal entries that forced me to recognize that I had attempted the same solution for a particular problem on several occasions, and unsurprisingly, the results did not improve with such a stagnant approach. My reflections forced me to recognize that conditions were not changing, people were not changing, and results were not changing—all because my leadership decisions and actions were not changing. Reflection forced me to admit that I had been as resistant to change as the others whom I had accused of being resistant and insufficiently enthusiastic to my favored initiatives. Reflection, in brief, forces leaders to climb down from the mythological perch, admit our human foibles, and get real.

Collaborative Leadership

At first, the phrase "collaborative leadership" appears to be an oxymoron. Collaboration implies shared decision making and a willingness to concede one's own agenda, while leadership requires asserting a vision, accomplishing a mission, and where necessary and appropriate, exerting authority and making unilateral decisions. President Eisenhower was fond of telling the tale of a meeting in which his staff unanimously supported an idea that Eisenhower opposed. The President said, "The vote is 15 ayes and one nay—

the nays have it.” While there surely are times in the lives of most leaders for such single-minded decision making in the face of near-universal opposition, the complexity of life in large and small organizations requires that we recognize some essential truths that mandate a collaborative approach:

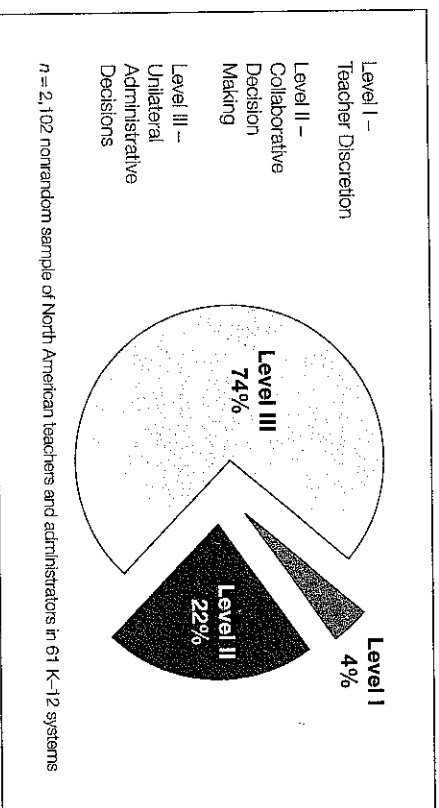
- Employees in any organization are volunteers. We can compel their attendance and compliance, but only they can volunteer their hearts and minds.
- Leaders can make decisions with their authority, but they can implement those decisions only through collaboration.
- Leverage for improved organizational performance happens through networks, not individuals. If the only source of inspiration for improvement is the imprecations of the individual leader, then islands of excellence may result and be recognized, but long-term systemwide improvement will continue to be an illusion.

In fact, decision making takes place at three levels in every organization. Level I allows for individual discretion. In schools, teachers enjoy wide discretion in choosing their teaching practices. Despite pervasive claims of micromanagement and teacher-proofing lessons, one need only watch three different classrooms of the same grade level and same subject to note significant differences in practice, interaction, questioning techniques, feedback, and assessment. In fact, to a greater degree than we might think in an era of standards, curriculum content varies widely from one classroom to the next. Level II decisions are made collaboratively: teachers and administrators seek common ground. Level III decisions are made unilaterally by leaders, and they usually are issues involving safety and values. After

all, the decisions to have fire drills, cafeteria hygiene, and gun-free schools are not matters of discretion, nor do they require a great deal of collaboration. When the issue is safety, a “command and control” orientation may be a matter of life and death.

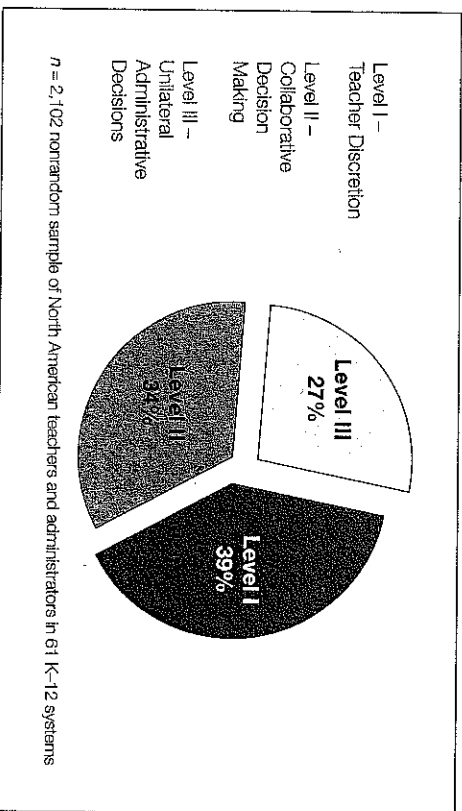
While this three-level decision structure seems logical to most people, surveys of teachers and administrators throughout North America reveal a striking trend. The surveys included more than 2,000 teachers and administrators from more than 60 school systems, including urban, suburban, and rural schools. Two parochial school systems were also represented in this survey. When asked to identify which levels of decision making are most common, the results, as reflected in Figure 4.3, show that the micromanagement stereotype holds sway. The vast majority of respondents believe that the majority of decisions are those at Level III, where the leader unilaterally makes the decisions. “It’s their way or the highway,” the respondents seemed to say of their leaders.

4.3 — Perceptions of Decision Making



I then asked the respondents to list those decisions over which they knew teachers exercised discretion based on their own professional experience—the real Level I decisions. Similarly, I asked them to list those actual decisions that were the result of teacher and administrative collaboration. Finally, I asked them to list those decisions that were Level III decisions made unilaterally by administrators, with neither collaboration nor discretion by teachers. The results were surprising in many respects. First, the actual decision-making structure is the opposite of the stereotype, with discretionary decisions by teachers representing the plurality of actual decisions in schools. As Figure 4.4 indicates, 39 percent of actual decisions listed by respondents were those made on a discretionary basis by teachers; 34 percent of the decisions they identified as collaborative, and the lowest percentage, 27 percent, were the Level III top-down administrator decisions.

4.4 — Actual Decision-Making Structure



Surprisingly, the actual data were consistent. The responses from quite diverse groups, including groups of teachers alone (without administrators) and groups of administrators alone (without teachers) all had the same sequence of decision-making frequency and uniformly defied the stereotype.

The point of this research is that just as leadership nostrums that are too simple to be true probably are, our own stereotypes about the leadership environment in which we work every day are also suspect and should be subject to challenge. There are times when each decision-making level is important, but the finding that most decisions in schools are either collaborative or discretionary decisions involving teachers is encouraging. Given the demands for training the next generation of leaders, the development of collaborative teams will be particularly important, as Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) conclude

As we worked more with the same organizations over time and with multiple leaders in the same unit or organization, we became attuned to the limitations of an exclusive focus on individual development. Individual leaders can no longer accomplish leadership tasks by virtue of their authority or their own leadership capacity. Instead, individuals and groups need to carry out the leadership tasks together in a way that integrates differing perspectives and recognizes areas of interdependence and shared work. For organizations or other collectives to experience sustained leadership over time—to have a sense of direction and alignment, to maintain commitment to the collective work, particularly when dealing with difficult problems that require organizational change—they need more than well-developed individuals. They need well-developed connections between individuals and deeper and more meaningful relationships around shared work. They need to form and deepen relationships within communities and across the boundaries between groups and collectives. They need to develop the capacities of collectives for shared sense making and for change. They need to get better at integrating the

learning into a unified sense of purpose and direction, new systems, and coherent shifts in culture—that is, to enact leadership together through the connections between individuals, groups, and organizations. (p. 21)

Analytical Leaders

Just as there is danger in greatly elevating analytical intelligence over every other intelligence, there is also danger in minimizing the importance of raw intellect and problem-solving ability. Leaders must consider the interaction of many complex variables, challenging facile conclusions and simple solutions. Even as technology is broadly disbursed and using computers is no longer just for nerds, the prototypical analytical leader in education is the master of budget details, assessment scores, and statistical data; he is apparently the smartest person in the room and is not afraid to let everyone else know it. Facts end arguments; and opinions fade away against the mountain of evidence, or so the stereotype goes. Analysis and collaboration are, in this stereotype, at opposite ends of the continuum. However, Boston Consulting Group leaders Philip Evans and Bob Wolf (2005), drawing on studies of groups such as computer programmers and automobile engineers, found that even in an intensely analytical environment, collaboration was at the heart of group success. Indeed, the most daunting analytical challenges required, rather than avoided, the greatest levels of collaboration.

The best analytical leaders are not masters of answers but rather persistent questioners. Their questions require the admission of ignorance, not the assertion of knowledge. As incongruous as it may seem, analytical leaders are so aware of the multivariate nature of life, systems, and organizations that they can be the engine that drives

collaboration. Return to the world of the prototypical analytical leaders, automotive engineers:

Toyota engineers are famously drilled to “ask why five times” to follow a chain of causes and effects back to a problem’s root. This is not a rapid cliché about thinking deeply. Quite the contrary, in fact. The precept’s merit is precisely in its superficiality. Saying that B causes A is simplistic—all the complexities of multiple interactions boiled down to a single cause and effect. But the chain of thought required to discover that C causes B, and D causes C, quickly takes you into a new domain, probably someone else’s. So rather than concoct complex solutions within their own domains, engineers must seek simple ones beyond them. “Doing your why-whys,” as the practice is known, is not about depth at all—it’s about breadth. (Evans & Wolf, 2005, p. 100)

If we extend this analogy to education, then the analytical leader is the one who will challenge assertions about student demographics being the cause for student achievement. If there are intervening variables, such as teacher quality, and we learn that students who are white and wealthy have a disproportionate quantity of teachers with the greatest experience and deepest subject matter expertise, then the analytical leaders will speak the truth. Similarly, analytical leaders inquire as to how the educational system treats males and females, students with English as a primary language and students who are learning English, students who are white and students who are brown and black. Analytical leaders speak the uncomfortable truths: Poor students do not exhibit low academic achievement because they are poor but because of the way that we treat poor children. Female students do not lag in science and math because they are female but because of the way that we treat female students. What commentators call an “ethnic gap” is, in fact, a teaching gap, a curriculum gap, and an expectations gap. Just as a computer programmer alone cannot

fix a bug, and an automotive engineer cannot independently recall a dangerous design flaw, so, too the analytical leader will require extraordinary collaboration skills to apply and distribute the lessons that inquiry and analysis can provide.

Communicative Leadership

Jim Collins (2001) was surprised to find that the “Great Communicator” theory of leadership was not supported by the evidence in most cases. Although some effective leaders are especially effective in oral communication, the majority of the most effective leaders in Collins’s study were neither glib nor articulate. Their other leadership skills more than made up for this deficit. Of equal importance, however, is the comparison group of ineffective leaders that Collins studied which included many leaders who were distinguished more by their ability to articulate their ideas than by their ability to put them into action for the benefit of stakeholders. Nevertheless, communication is a skill that every complex organization demands of its leadership team. Although traditional written and oral communication skills are part of the repertoire of an effective leader, voice mail, Web casts, and e-mail are essential to allow the leader to create personal communication for a wide audience. Leaders underestimate the power of personalized communication and overestimate the effectiveness of hierarchical communication. During the course of every major change initiative I have witnessed the words “I wish I knew what was going on” are at the root of failures in translating leadership intent into action. At the start of each week, I give my staff a “Monday minute” that provides kudos, condolences, announcements, and encouragement. The wise limitations of our voice mail system

prevent me from rhetorical excess, as a kind voice will remind me after 180 seconds that I have exceeded the permissible limit for a message. But at least once a week, all my colleagues know, on the same day at the same time, what is happening at the Center for Performance Assessment. I also answer (without exaggeration) close to 500 e-mails every week. Some e-mails are mundane, organizational requirements of daily life, but some e-mails are from former students in China and Africa, or from people who found my e-mail address through books, articles, or colleagues, and feel the need to reach out and ask a question. Many e-mails are from graduate students, teachers, school leaders, and board members, asking specific questions about issues that represent their immediate needs. I do my best to answer each message, hoping that, as happened recently in the Dallas–Fort Worth airport, someone will stop me within hearing distance of my spouse and say, “I can’t believe that you answered my e-mail. Thanks!” as we rush off to our respective flights.

There is a distinctly nontechnological side to effective communication. I still write personal thank-you notes to every client and every employee, and I encourage every leader to do the same. Disregard your apprehension about your penmanship or concerns that in the Internet era your personally signed notes will be regarded as old-fashioned. The power of gratitude, recognition, and appreciation is extraordinary. What letters and cards do you keep? My stash of letters and cards includes, amazingly, not only those I have received from friends, loved ones, and revered leaders, but also letters I have written and that were returned to me years later by parents and teachers. In the 21st century, you can communicate with millions of people at once, but the power of personal communication, voice to voice, pen to paper, heart to heart, is undiminished by technology. Communicative leaders are simultaneously high tech and high touch,

maximizing their reach through technology, as they optimize their effectiveness with the encouragement, appreciation, and nurturing that only a personal handshake, hug, note, or the spoken word can provide.

Thus far we have explored an extraordinary range of leadership research, strategies, and typologies. Our goal, however, is not complexity and bewilderment, but action and implementation. In the next chapter we will learn how to take school leadership from planning to performance.



What Matters Most

From Planning to Performance

The Myths of Planning

There is a new religion spreading like wildfire in school systems and state departments of education. The religion is “Documentarianism” and, with missionary zeal, its adherents believe that with just the right school improvement plan, or the right format, or with all the boxes completed in all the right places, the deity to whom they pray will grant educational miracles. Perhaps because it is easier to monitor two-dimensional planning documents than it is to review the implementation of initiatives in the complex, real world of schools, regulatory authorities at all levels appear to be consumed with documentary compliance. As a personal matter, I believe in tolerance and religious freedom, right up to the point that one person’s religion tramples on the freedom of another. If the followers of Documentarianism were merely proponents of a quirky belief who wore funny hats and danced around campfires, then I could tolerate their belief systems and expect them to tolerate mine. But Documentarianism is not merely an innocuous personal belief system.