Chapter Two

Vices and Virtues

This chapter is about a vicious circle in which principals in the United States increasingly find themselves trapped; the next will be about a more virtuous cycle that establishes and sustains the conditions for success. The principal needs to become a balanced leader—minimizing the counterproductive actions and specializing in the generative actions that yield positive results.

Panic Time?

Do you feel a terrible sense of urgency? Or is what you feel these days more like panic? John Kotter (2008), a long-standing change leader guru, has a great take on the concept of urgency. He says, true enough, that big changes can’t be initiated without some terrible sense of urgency, but once we leave the starting blocks, the need is to focus our efforts. Without focus, urgency makes things worse, becoming what Kotter calls “a false sense of frenetic urgency” rather than the “true sense of urgency” that forges and allies itself with forces of actual change. Which is it for you: the false urgency that accompanies persistent failure, including repeatedly failed solutions; anxiety, frustration, anger, and a feeling of “what a mess”; and frenetic activity to cure the problem, running from one unlikely remedy to another? Or an urgency that focuses a powerful desire to win, right now; a sense of great opportunities coupled with the realization that there are hazards everywhere; and relentless, fast-moving, alert activity directed toward important issues? Perhaps we should simplify that description to a focus that purges irrelevant activities in order to free up time and energy for ideas that hold real promise.
Urgency can push one off or on course, as this chapter will suggest. And once we get off course, our urgency pushes us further afield. A start that gets a critical matter wrong will make the situation worse. A start that gets it right will turn crisis into breakthrough. Which type of bike are you riding? The one whose spokes spin “virtuous circles,” or the one that turns out to be “vicious”?

Although it is true that things can deteriorate faster than they can be mended, it doesn’t take that much longer for the right dynamic of factors to create lasting, powerful solutions. When effective actions replace ineffective ones, they motivate people to do even more. As we will see later, substantial progress can kick in within a two-year period and become stronger after that, but only if you avoid what I have called the “wrong” policy drivers.

Four Wrong Choices for Driving Policy

A principal is not always in all respects the person in the driver’s seat, foot on the pedal, hands on the wheel. So some of what I plan to say here applies equally to others who would steer and pace the principal’s daily ride at work.

I don’t mean to question motives. When one is facing a crucial situation, it is easy to do the wrong (meaning the ineffective or counterproductive) thing, especially if one does not feel entirely in charge. But even when one is constrained by external conditions, there is always leeway for action. Here as elsewhere I will try to keep the main points few in number.

We can start with a brief portrayal of the big picture in the United States that has taken us to the current crisis and its accompaniment—panic that makes matters worse. The United States has been in a constant state of urgency for three decades, ever since the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), with its famous rallying cries that the foundation of America’s education system was being eroded “by a rising tide of mediocrity,” and that if a foreign power were to try to impose the system of education that existed, we would have considered it as “an act of war.” The time had come to declare a new “Imperative for Education Reform,” as the subtitle of the report claimed. There was an urgent need to compete economically in an increasingly competitive global world, and education was to be the route. Quality for all was to be the answer. Unfortunately, there was no discernible strategy that derived from the report or its aftermath. A crisis without a strategy is a recipe for random action and growing frustration.

The next stab at reform was the ambitious No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a bipartisan education act passed in 2001 that President George H. W. Bush signed in January 2002. Representing cumulative frustration about the lack of progress, NCLB mandated that all students would be tested in grades 3 through 8 in reading and math, and that all students would be required to achieve “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in their test scores. Individual schools that failed AYP for two years in a row would be subject to escalating consequences including eventual closure. Moreover, states would be required to have a “qualified teacher” in every school by 2006. Finally, every child was to obtain proficiency in the basic tests by 2014. There was no national framework—each state was required to have standards and tests, but was left to decide on the actual standards.
Now we had a discernible strategy: the wishful thinking of undefined standards with no particular way of enacting them. I hope you are beginning to appreciate how this ill-conceived world is beginning to close in on the principalship.

This brings us to the present, when in 2009 President Obama introduced the current education policy under the banner of Race to the Top. Acknowledging that NCLB was too prescriptive, the new legislation was based on four components: new standards and assessments; massively improved assessment and data systems; greater quality of teachers and principals via recruitment, appraisal, rewards, and punishment; and a focus on turning around the bottom 5 percent of schools. Finally, although this is not the place to elaborate, the CCSS also entered the scene, endorsed by over 90 percent of the states that have signed on to define world-class standards in English language arts and math and to develop corresponding assessments aligned to these new standards. The work on standards and assessments is well under way, with an assessment system to be established by 2014–2015.

What is the principal to make of all this? As well intentioned as the reforms might be, the fact is that the principal is being led to a role that narrows the sphere of influence he or she can have. To be explicit, “standards and accountability” are exceedingly weak strategies for driving reform. For a deeply insightful parallel analysis applied to the teaching profession, see Jal Mehta’s book The Allure of Order (2013).

Mehta shows how the evolution of standards and accountability as applied to the teaching profession with greater intensity over the years has fundamentally weakened the effectiveness of the profession. His brilliant conclusion is that policymakers are trying to do at the back end with accountability what they should have done at the front end with capacity building. De-professionalization is the only outcome of such a strategy. I will show in this book how this predominance of “back-end accountability” is boxing in the principal in ways that will not end well for the principal or for the system as a whole.

In previous work, I have framed the problem in terms of the interplay of “wrong” and “right” policy drivers. In particular, four main, interrelated barriers, what I call the wrong drivers—each of them basically an error of perspective—keep the principalship stranded on the shoulder of the high road of school success.

By drivers, I mean policies and associated strategies—usually set by federal entities, states, or districts—that are intended, well, to “drive” a school or larger system to new levels of success. Wrong drivers do not always look obviously wrong, and they are not wrong topics to consider, but the evidence pertaining to the four I will discuss here, illustrated in Exhibit 2.1 (from my paper “Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform,” 2011a), is that, as drivers, they do not actually produce the desired results. They get people off on the wrong foot. Adjacent to each wrong driver listed is a better alternative. Do keep in mind that right and wrong are nearly always questions of context, and the context here is defined by the need for change.

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<th>Exhibit 2.1 Wrong vs. Right Drivers</th>
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<td><strong>Wrong</strong></td>
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The four “right drivers” must form the foundation and guiding principles of action and integrate the beneficial aspects of the wrong drivers into the service of change. The wrong drivers can be attractive up-front because they look like quick fixes, can be legislated, and can appeal superficially to the public. In the final analysis, the right drivers guide and integrate the four wrong ones so as to create maximum benefit.

**Accountability**

Accountability assumes that the most important thing to do is to make sure that a person down below acts in line with directions or criteria passed down by someone higher up. As a rigid priority and attitude, accountability belongs at the top of the wrong-driver chart because it permeates the others below it. It is understandable (but wrong) to conclude that because the education system often lacks focus, we must tighten it with strong direct accountability. Human systems are not that straightforward. At best, carrots and sticks work only in the short term, and always become dysfunctional in the middle to long terms, as Daniel Pink (2009), the observer of business, work, and management, has so convincingly shown in his book *Drive*, an examination of motivation. Even if you loosen the strict requirements of accountability and give local schools more leeway (in exchange for which they have to deliver greater accountability), results will not be obtained on any scale because local capacity cannot be assumed.

In our work in whole-system change, my colleagues and I have shown time and again that if you give people skills (invest in capacity building), most of them will become more accountable. In Ontario, for example, we have accomplished widespread improvement in literacy and high school graduation across the entire public school system of forty-nine hundred schools and seventy-two districts. We have no overt accountability beyond high expectations, investing in capacity building, increasing transparency of results and practice, and maintaining a relentless focus on progress. Accountability in the end works because people become increasingly committed to results, to their peers, and to the system as a whole. To take one example, York Region District School Board, just north of Toronto, with 180 schools and huge diversity, steadily improved its results in literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation over the first decade of this century employing these very strategies (Fullan, 2010a). There are countless other examples of this phenomenon, including many districts in the United States (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

Think of the following analogy: capacity building is to accountability what finance is to accounting. Finance is about how people organize and invest their assets; if you have only accounting, you are merely keeping careful records while you go out of business! In the same way, there is more to accountability than measuring results; you need also to develop people’s capacity to achieve the results. Extreme pressure without capacity results in dysfunctional behavior.

Tighten the screws of accountability, and people will game the system, as was demonstrated in Atlanta. From 2001 to 2009, the Atlanta public school system steadily increased its test scores, advancing its leader, Beverly Hall, to the distinction of superintendent of the year in 2009. By 2011, she had been indicted by a grand jury along with thirty-four other educators.
(teachers, instructional coaches, and principals), charged with creating a culture of endemic cheating whereby educators were encouraged to achieve targets at any cost (fabricating answers, falsely reporting results, and so on) and were protected and rewarded for doing so. Investigators found pervasive cheating at all levels of the system, which stunned many in the public and the nation. Maybe stunning on such a scale, but predictable when accountability makes targets so crucial that people will do whatever they can get away with to survive (or thrive in this case, as results were tied to financial bonuses for the superintendent). Reward the high performers and punish the low with a distorted accountability system, and many will engage in self-interested and counterproductive actions. If you are a principal “leading” a school in such a system, the best you can do is to get better at a bad game—do what you can to please the higher-ups in order to protect your staff and yourself. What starts on a small scale becomes a systemic problem—a culture of cheating.

Wrongheaded accountability is like pushing a train by building up power in the caboose. It is far more effective to pull humans than to try to push them. This is why the better alternative to simply demanding accountability is to aim at building capacity from the beginning, with an explicit focus on results. Paradoxically, this produces greater accountability, as people in groups are more likely to hold themselves accountable, because transparency puts on the right kind of pressure for greater performance and makes it easier and more effective to identify the true laggards, who turn out (after capacity building) to be very small in number—much less than 5 percent.

In the next chapter, I will show what capacity building is, especially with respect to what I call the professional capital of teachers, and how the principal can lead its development, yielding better results and more accountable behavior. It turns out that you have to get at accountability indirectly by improving the performance of individuals and the group. In short, accountability is achieved through targeted capacity building rather than directly.

**Individualistic Solutions**

The fallacy of individualistic solutions—let’s get better teachers, better school leaders—is that individuals do not change cultures very easily. In addition, you have to use the power of the group to change the group. Instead of allowing principals to focus on the group, current policies bog down principals in piecemeal individualism. Here principals are in double jeopardy. At the same time that they are prodded or persuaded to attempt to develop their staffs one teacher at a time, principals themselves are often handled that way by their districts. Let’s see how both of these “solutions” founder, starting with the teacher.

Historically, teaching has been a “lonely profession” in which teachers operate their own kingdoms behind the classroom door. Current policymakers have identified the problem correctly in this respect: most teachers don’t get feedback on their teaching and thus don’t improve. No feedback for teachers, ergo no improvement—absolutely correct. But the form of “feedback” educational bureaucracies often resort to is of the carrot-and-stick variety, which results in a no-win, perennial cat-and-mouse game between principal cats and teacher mice. I will show how teacher appraisal schemes must be reconsidered. The primary tool for improvement in any organization
is not one-to-one appraisal but rather cultures that build in
learning every day and that use appraisal to supplement and
strengthen the learning (and indeed take action in relation to
persistent low performers). If the appraisal system is perverse—
that is, if it becomes artificial and is not linked to clear improve-
ment—leaders will either have to play the game or otherwise
engage in something that they know is inauthentic. Effective
principals, those who want to get something done, will figure
this out and learn to work with teachers in ways that do not
waste time or are counterproductive. As wise cats, they will find
it more productive to join the mice.

The effort led by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to
develop effective measures of teaching effectiveness gets the
problem half right: teachers need good feedback and normally
don't get it. Thus we have witnessed an explosion in the de-
velopment of instruments and frameworks for “teacher appraisal.”
Reinforced by Race to the Top legislation that I earlier reviewed
as Mehta’s “back-end accountability,” the new evaluation “tools”
that have been developed are being applied to individual teachers
and tied to merit pay and other crude incentives. The theory
of action is this: everyone knows that teachers are the single
most important education force relative to student learning, so
we must assess their performance and output, reward the best,
and punish the clunkers. Do this for, say, a decade, and you will
end up with a greatly improved teaching profession. Teacher
appraisal instruments or tools are thus (erroneously) seen as
the way forward.

Well, a fool with a tool is still a fool. What the carrot-and-stick
policy purveyors don’t get is that people simply don’t improve
that way; a few perhaps, but never many. Countries that have a
strong teaching profession and legions of great teachers—such
as Singapore, Finland, or Canada—did not achieve that state
by using the crude method of reward and punishment. Instead,
they established a “developmental” approach to making teach-
ers more effective: they developed leaders, such as principals
who could help teachers work together in a focused way to use
diagnostic student data linked to the improvement of instruc-
tion in order to get better results; they operate in transparent
ways so that people can learn from one another; they monitor
progress and intervene when necessary. In short, they create
high-performance expectations and cultures.

With current reform efforts, U.S. principals are caught in
the middle, where they can decide to waste their time in either
of two ways: they can dutifully engage in the time-consuming,
low-yield activity of conducting appraisals and processing a
system that garners little by way of results (including, by the
way, dutifully assessing poor performance, only to find that the
system does not back them up and that they are alienated from
their teachers), or they can collude with teachers and go through
the motions; that is, they can conduct perfunctory appraisals
because they know the system does not work to improve teach-
ing. There is a better way, as we will see in Chapter Three, where
I describe how to create conditions under which feedback is not
only constructive but listened to and acted on.

Until we change the current system—and my point is that
policymakers are making it worse by intensifying dysfunc-
tional back-end accountability—we will continue to get results
like those reported by Jenny Anderson (2013) in the New
York Times. Anderson notes that in the most recent teacher
evaluations in Florida, Tennessee, and Michigan, 97 percent,
98 percent, and 98 percent of teachers, respectively, were deemed effective or highly effective. When the system is not carefully constructed to lead to actual improvement, principals engage in superficial appraisals. Even when they aim at improvement, the individual efforts—one teacher at a time—rarely add up. The answer is not to make the evaluations more rigorous, unless you want more cat-and-mouse activity.

In Chapter Four, I will reposition teacher appraisal so that it can contribute to teacher development as part of a more integrated system of improvement. In essence, in dealing with their staffs, principals should shift from focusing on one-to-one work with each individual teacher to leading collaborative work that improves quality throughout the faculty.

Now to the second jeopardy: how principals themselves are handled, another face of what I call the “individualistic bias” of reform strategies. Typically, districts and larger systems attempt to solve fundamental problems by producing more and better “individual leaders.” The weakness of this solution is subtle. The point is not to stop developing better individual would-be principals, but rather to stop counting on them to save the day. These personnel or human resource actions are necessary, but not the first, most crucial point. The primary issue is to change the culture of the school and the district so that learning is the work—that is, so that people are getting better at what they do because learning to be more effective is built in to the values and routines of the organization. As day-to-day learning becomes the prime activity, districts can reinforce it with better personnel practices that attract, cultivate, and retain great leaders, including principals. But great leaders, one by one, will never change the culture. A wrong culture will absorb well-meaning individuals faster than we can produce them. We need to stop depending on Band-Aid remedies, and instead focus on changing the culture itself. And here, principals have a key role, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

Even seemingly very good examples of district reform reflect the individualistic bias, and in fact show how subtle this bias can be. Meredith Honig, an educational leadership and policy specialist at the University of Washington, and her colleagues conducted a detailed study of how three school districts “fundamentally transformed their work and relationships with schools to support districtwide teaching and learning improvement” (2010, p. iii). As they say at the outset of their report, “a striking feature of all three central office transformation efforts was the focus on building the capacity of school principals to lead for instructional improvement within their schools” (p. v).

This sounds as though it is on the right track, but there is a subtle and powerful difference between focusing on individuals and developing groups (along with individuals). Let’s pursue this critical distinction.

Honig and her colleagues point to the role of districts as they differentiated supports for principals, modeled ways of thinking and acting, provided tools and their use, and served as brokers between principals and external resources.

As one instructional leader of principals put it:

"I . . . spend time in [schools] helping the principals . . . focus their work . . . Working on the quality of teaching and learning . . . Looking at best practices. Giving them feedback. [If I don't] . . . it is not going to pay out in dividends in the student achievement. Because . . . we are creatures of habit first of all. So taking a principal who has not spent time in their
classrooms and getting them to shift their focus takes a lot of . . . intentional work. And then to be able to maintain that focus in a culture where people [e.g., teachers] are used to . . . keeping you in an office to deal with this one [student] all day—that’s a whole other level of work . . . And then helping people [principals] to prioritize their time so that they do spend time on the core business in the areas that matter the most.” (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010, p. 27)

One of the three districts had a checklist of twenty-six instructional practices that principals should look for. Let me be crystal clear: these practices do increase the principal’s knowledge of instruction and are useful for the professional development of principals, but they can in no way serve to change the culture of the school as a whole, let alone the culture of the district. There is nothing in the Honig report that describes what principals do to affect groups of teachers. This is not the fault of the researchers. These districts, all geared up for instructional focus, were attempting to improve teaching through the individual efforts of principals and other instructional leaders. It would be gratuitous to add, but I will anyway, that one of the districts was Atlanta. Instructional focus can be deceptive. What looks like an intense devotion to it may in fact be ineffective or even counterproductive. Instructional focus, as I will show in Chapter Four, must be very finely honed if it is to affect all the teachers.

Similarly, Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, and Simon’s (2013) study of six districts, Rethinking Leadership: The Changing Role of Principal Supervisors, compounds the problem by adding another layer of supervisors who focus on individualistic instructional leadership of their principals.

There is good professional development here to a point. But the point is not to have layered individualism, but rather to influence the culture of focused collaborative work. There are a lot of good things in what the six districts consider to be important: reviewing school data, observing classrooms and student work, understanding the pedagogical shift in reading and writing instruction, using student performance data to improve classroom instruction, conducting principal evaluations, and understanding the shift in mathematics expectations, instruction and standards (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 30). By tightening the links from principal supervisors to principals to teachers you can get a blip in increased performance (compared to the previous “loosely coupled” system) but you quickly reach a ceiling effect. Here is Corcoran et al’s conclusion: “unfortunately, there is no data showing a direct link between student attainment and any one principal supervisory model or approach” (p. 53). There is no direct link because deeper change comes through both direct and indirect effects of individuals and groups working in a coordinated fashion. We will see that this work is nonetheless explicit, powerful, and of lasting value.

My point in this section is that attempting to solve system problems with individualistic strategies is as typical as it is ineffective. Individual leader development is a necessary but not sufficient solution to the challenges of achieving system effectiveness. Another problematic case in point is Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, and MacFarlane’s otherwise useful study (2013) of six districts as they develop “the principal pipeline.” If you only had to develop human capital, the pipeline might be OK, but it is an unfortunate metaphor. You stuff them in at one end, shape them uniformly, and pull them out the other end, where there is only
one spout. We need pools of talent rather than pipelines (thanks to Andy Hargreaves for this concept; personal communication, September 2013). We need to shape the role so that principals are helped to work with “groups” and to learn from other principals as a way of changing the culture of the organization.

**Technology**

The third pair of wrong and right drivers—technology versus pedagogy—is fascinating in its history. By and large over the past decades, the investment in technology has been largely a matter of acquisition—buy, buy, buy—not a matter of figuring out how pedagogy (new forms of instruction) can use computers, personal devices, software, and the like to deepen and accelerate learning. Larry Cuban (2013) arrived at a similar conclusion when he examined the role of technology over the last forty years and found no evidence of positive impact on the “black box of classroom practice.” Thus the principal’s valuable time is eaten up by pursuing technology funding or by managing how these new “gifts” purchased by districts and states can be retrofitted.

I will have more to say about technology in Chapter Six. In other work that my colleagues and I are engaged in, we are concluding that radical breakthroughs are occurring in schools where new technologies are being combined with new pedagogies (learning partnerships between and among teachers and students), generating productive innovations (Fullan, 2013b; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). This new future, which is already upon us, will demand new leadership from the principal to lead the group in integrating technology and pedagogy in the service of deep learning. Chapter Six contains some examples of this new work in action.

**Fragmented Policies**

Like technology as a driver, this last one also offers endless ways to fill a principal’s day. Ad hoc or fragmented strategies turn a principal’s job into one of keeping too many batons or chainsaws in the air, endlessly juggling ill-shaped, ill-timed, and uncoordinated policies. Even if particular initiatives are not in conflict, the overload of disconnected pieces becomes impossible to manage. Sometimes policies are “aligned” on paper but never seem to cohere in the minds of principals and teachers. The result is that principals are expected to lead the implementation of policies that they do not comprehend and that indeed are incomprehensible as a set. The better driver, for which “systemness” seems like a good word to me, functions to coordinate strategies and align the efforts they require. We don’t need a fancy analysis for systemness. It is essentially the extent to which individual members identify with each other and with the overall system. It is not alignment on paper that counts but rather coherence in the minds of implementers. We will return to this solution later, but the key notion is that sound strategies are ones that produce coherence or shared mind-sets in the day-to-day lives of teachers and principals.

**Drivers in Perspective**

The four misguided drivers I have just described are wrong choices for front-end forces for reforming a system, be it a single school or a district of them. They will not and cannot work to lead system change. It is not so much that we need to discard them, but more that they need to be repositioned to play a supporting role for the right drivers. In short, if you place primary
emphasis on capacity building, collaborative effort, pedagogy, and systemness, and integrate accountability, human resource policies, technology, and specific policies as part of the overall strategy, you will achieve greater success overall.

Too Broad, Too Narrow: The Transformative Versus Instructional Leader

Stubborn problems set us oscillating back and forth, like an unconfident boxer who weaves from side to side, believing he lacks the punch to win the bout. Over the years, educators and their mentors have cycled through a “too broad” period of supposing that what has come to be known as “transformative leadership” must be the key, then back to a “too narrow” period in which principals are expected to be right in there giving specific feedback to as many individual teachers as they can. If you have been in education long enough, you can get hit by the same pendulum more than once!

If you’ve been a principal for a while, you remember when transformative leadership was all the rage. Leaders were to become generally attuned to the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap as they inspired teachers and others to new levels of energy and commitment. The shared mission was meant to become a rallying point for teachers somehow to accomplish things never before achieved. It was all very broad indeed. Specificity and clarity never ensued.

In reality, the evidence shows that the transformative leadership concept and movement simply didn’t work. Viviane Robinson of the University of Auckland is a leading international education researcher specializing in leadership and school improvement. Conducting an in-depth meta-analysis of twenty-two studies, she and her colleagues found that the impact of transformative leadership was a puny 0.11 in effect size on student achievement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). (An effect size is a statistical measure of the degree of relationship between two variables—an effect size below .40 is considered to be weak or insignificant). Basically they found that creating a general inspiring vision and instilling motivation in teachers to join the cause were not specific enough to produce actual results. One can readily surmise that creating broad, even inspiring messages does not help much with the actual mechanics of getting where you want to go.

Robinson saw more promise at the narrower end. She found that what she called “instructional leadership” (what I call leading learning) had a significant (but still not impressive) effect size of 0.42. This finding and those of others have indeed raised the expectation that principals should become “instructional leaders.” But what does that really mean? I realize that it is heretical these days to conclude that principals can engage in “too much” instructional leadership or, even more disturbing, to suggest that principals can have too much “moral imperative” (defined as a deep and relentless commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap in learning for all students), but in my view, the shift to instructional leadership has led the principalship down an unproductively narrow path of being expected to micromanage or otherwise directly affect instruction, as we shall shortly see.

The narrow view raises two problems: first, in complex matters, you can’t really micromanage to good effect; second it can be incredibly time consuming for principals, diverting
them from doing other things that can shape learning more powerfully. Supervising individual teachers into better performance is simply impossible if you have a staff of, say, more than twenty teachers. Principals who find themselves in districts that require that they spend X amount of time, say, two days per week, observing in classrooms will be less effective overall because they can’t influence very many teachers in any given time period; they can’t be experts in all areas of instruction; and they will end up neglecting other aspects of their role that would make a bigger difference, such as developing the professional capital of teachers as a group, along with other key aspects of leadership essential for motivating people to work together with the leader and others. (See Chapter Three.)

A similar point has been made earlier in an article by Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano (2009). (DuFour advanced through a long, distinguished career as teacher, principal, and superintendent to his current role as education writer and consultant. Marzano is another leading researcher and consultant whose practical translations of current research and theory into classroom strategies are internationally known and widely practiced.) As they put it, “time devoted to building the capacity of teachers to work in teams is far better spent than time devoted to observing individual teachers” (DuFour & Marzano, 2009, p. 67). But somehow these observations have been overshadowed by the accountability juggernaut. I asked Lyle Kirtman, who has spent the last decade identifying the competencies of effective education leaders (more about his findings in later chapters), if he had encountered the problem of too narrow a focus on instructional leadership. Within a nanosecond he fired off two examples:

One principal in a wealthy community received a vote of no confidence from her faculty. Her focus was on instructional leadership and the use of data to improve results for all her students. Her superintendent interviewed ten faculty members and found that her communication skills, her empathy for faculty and students, a lack of support for teachers on parent complaints, and her relationship to her principal peers in the district were extremely poor. Her leadership style was more on content and data and not strong in dealing with people. She was very angry about the superintendent’s viewpoint because she believed that her instructional skills were exceptional and that it was difficult teachers that were the problem.

Another principal in a suburban district was focused on instruction and data analysis for students. She was confrontational with teachers about how they needed to improve. There were constant complaints from teachers about her lack of overall leadership skills. The superintendent finally received a vote of no confidence from the faculty and removed her as principal. (Personal communication, March 2013)

You could say that these two principals were not very good leaders—that they lacked emotional intelligence or even good managerial qualities—and that is the point. A narrow focus on instructional leadership and student achievement can shut out other dimensions of leading learning. And, strange as it may seem, being “deeply passionate” can lead to blind spots if you become overbearing—a phenomenon that Kaplan and Kaiser (2013) discuss in their book Fear Your Strengths (more about this issue in Chapter Five).

In short, in the current climate, it is easy to go overboard on instructional leadership. Principals need to be specifically involved in instruction so that they are knowledgeable about its
nature and importance, but if they try to run the show down to
the last detail, it will have a very brief run on Broadway indeed.

Principal Autonomy and Micromanaging:
Other Roadside Attractions

Another false step that is appealing on the surface is to strip
away the constraints of bureaucracy by giving the school prin-
cipal more autonomy in exchange for delivered accountability.
Thus principals can be given more discretion over hiring staff
and more flexibility with respect to budget and resources. New
York City used this model, as have certain states in Australia
recently. In these cases, individual schools are granted greater
autonomy, but are expected to deliver strong accountability
through teacher appraisal and student test results. This deal with
the devil has several problems. First, not many schools have the
capacity in the first place, so they could hardly do better if left
on their own. Second, those that are most advantaged often are
the first to respond, creating an even greater gap between the
have and have-nots. Third, it’s not that good a deal anyway.
It puts everyone constantly on guard and makes it impossible
for isolated successes to play any part in promoting a larger,
more lasting solution. Thus, individual autonomy of schools is
no more of a solution than individual autonomy of teachers.

The devil loves to tempt individual principals to go their own
way. Autonomy is almost always preferable to being in a bad rela-
tionship (for example, a stifling bureaucracy), but the truth is
that a good relationship is better still, and this is where my argu-
ment is heading. In the rest of the book, I will make the case that
connected learning, within and across schools and systems, is
the only way for whole systems to improve and keep improving.

Micro Madness

The main point of this chapter is that principals are being led
down a narrow path of instructional leadership that will ultil-
mately prove futile. They are being called on to micromanage,
whereby they go after instruction in detail, teacher by teacher.
DuFour and Mattos (2013), both former principals now
engaged in research, comment on what Race to the Top preci-
sion has spawned in Tennessee, one of the first states to win the
grant. The model that the state proposed (and was funded to
carry out) “calls for 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation to be
based on principal observations, 35 percent on student growth,
and 15 percent on student achievement data” (p. 36). DuFour
and Mattos summarize the new role:

Principal evaluators must observe new teachers six times
each year and licensed teachers four times each year, consid-
ering one or more of four areas—instruction, professionalism,
classroom environment, and planning. These four areas are
further divided into 116 subcategories. Observations are to
be preceded by a pre-conference, in which the principal and
the teacher discuss the lesson, and followed by a post-confer-
ence, in which the principal shares his or her impressions of
the teacher’s performance. Principals must then input data on
the observation using the state rubric for assessing teachers.
Principals report that the process requires four to six hours for
each observation (2013, p. 36)

One can readily surmise that if you are a principal in such
as system, under intense scrutiny to cover all your assignments,
you will either burn out or learn to go through the procedures
superficially. In either case, actual improvement is the casualty.
If it is any consolation to the Tennessees of the world, it is easier
to shift from such micromanaging to what I call developing the
professional capital of one’s teachers than it is to shift from exces-
sive individualism (and get anywhere at all). With excessive indi-
vidualism, or greater autonomy, one does not necessarily develop
expertise, whereas micromanagers at least develop expertise in
instruction that can be useful in the service of collaborative work.

A good example of the contrast between autonomy and
focused collaboration can be found in David Kirp’s revealing
study (2013) of Union City, New Jersey. Union: City is a poor,
crowded, Latino community that for much of the last quarter
of the last century was the poorest-performing district in the
state. That changed in the last decade. By 2011, 89.4 percent
of the Union City students graduated from high school—15
percent more than the national average. Among other things,
the Union City district got the principalship right, finding that
“just right” productive ground between micromanaging and
excessive autonomy. Kirp comments on nearby Trenton, a city
that embraced what he calls “the great leader theory” (exces-
sive individualism, in my words) whereby “superstar” principals
were hired and given autonomy in exchange for delivering
results. The results didn’t materialize. In Trenton from 1999 to
2008, the percentage of students passing grade 8 math tests rose
from 18.2 percent to 21.9 percent. (By comparison, in Union
City, the corresponding figures were 42 percent to 71 percent.)

Union City has been successful because it focuses on devel-
op ing and employing the professional capital of its teachers,
principals, and schools. Kirp (2013) refers to Les, a principal
who does understand her job in this fashion:

Aside from observing and evaluating the teachers, Les needs
to help them improve. One strategy is to break through the
isolation of the classrooms, encouraging teachers to work
together, jointly devise projects for their students, and talk
about what’s working well in their classrooms and what isn’t.
Such collaboration, the evidence shows, can make a substanc-
tial difference in the quality of instruction. (p. 54)

Very few districts or states seem to grasp the critical distinc-
tion between focused collaboration and detailed micromanag-
ing. The road to perdition that I am describing is paved with
good intentions. Take the recent document from New Jersey,
Student Growth Objectives: Developing and Using Practical
Measures of Student Learning (New Jersey Department of
Education, 2013). There follows quite a good, rational discus-
sion of specific and measurable objectives linked to standards,
based on prior learning, measured between two points in time.
Teachers are then required to develop student growth objec-
tives (SGOs), have them approved by the principal (or the prin-
cipal’s designee) by November, with any changes completed and
approved by February; finally the teacher’s supervisor scores
the SGO, with the rating being discussed at the annual sum-
mary conference.

What starts as a reasonable proposition—let’s be clear, know
the individual students, and provide instruction accordingly—
turns into one big compliance nightmare for teachers and prin-
cipals alike. A good idea becomes an odious task. There is only
one thing worse than having to carry out an odious task, and
that is having to supervise those carrying out such tasks. This
type of well-intentioned compliance regimen is being replicated
around the country in the name of accountability. It will be
nothing but a time and energy drain for all involved. The cure
becomes the disease, and it is ruining the principalship, not to
mention student learning itself. In addition, the entire premise is individualistic. There is nothing in the strategy about developing the group. It's as if the system has unlimited supervisory capacity and that principals have all the time in the world to change teachers one at a time.

Large-scale compliance diktats minimize impact—just the opposite of what is intended. To be clear, there are good ideas in the SGO document, but they cannot be fulfilled by compliance-driven specificity. The goodness gets squandered as principals and teachers find themselves going through the contortions of compliance or the distortions of defiance. Far better to set the conditions for maximizing impact that I describe in this book, whereby principals and teachers are helped to develop their professional capital and corresponding expertise and commitments, and then scrutinize for quality and accountability, all in a transparent manner. As Kirtman (2013) found about effective leaders, they are low on compliance for the sake of compliance, and high on influence for the sake of learning. They influence others to learn and to take related action. Commitment always trumps compliance as a change strategy.

My conclusion is that neither school autonomy nor detailed observations are effective in producing results at scale. Instead we need a model that is still intense in its focus on instruction but that also involves and motivates all teachers.

Time to Retune

Given the urgency of the need for reform, we are rapidly losing ground relative to a problem that has severe consequences for society: the gap between high and low performers in the education system. In addition to the facts that the counter-productive strategies we've discussed in this chapter are really barriers that make the principal's job more difficult, erode the energy and commitment of principals (thereby squandering the second most powerful impact factor for student learning), and simply do not work. The further irony is that these barriers make the role of school principals way more complicated than it needs to be, loading them with one big bundle of distracters that render the job unsustainable. As I noted in Chapter One, 75 percent of principals find that the job has become too complex, and thereby unsatisfying. Principals cannot be effective under these circumstances. We have taken instructional leadership too literally or have chased the dream of individual heroic leaders working autonomously to save the day.

This need not be the case, and the good news is that ideas are emerging that could make the principal's job less complex, less distracting, and yes, more instructionally effective for all. This chapter has been long on vices and short on virtues. It is time to change the channel. A new, more powerful role—that of the principal as lead learner—is becoming clear. The next chapter lays out this exciting and efficacious new direction.
Action Items

- Has any change at your school gotten off on the wrong foot or gone in the wrong direction? How did that happen?

- Have decisions in your district been driven recently by accountability, individualistic solutions, technology, or fragmented policies/strategies? What driver(s) might have been better?

- Does too much of your time go to micromanagement? Why?

- Are you in the right place between the broad and narrow paths? What steps can you take to get to the right place?

Discuss with Colleagues

- What vicious circles do we see in our daily work? What virtuous ones?

- How can we keep up a sense of urgency that leads to right decisions and productive change?

- How can we steer clear of micromanagement?

- How has our school district been affected by the movements for instructional leadership or transformational leadership, or by school autonomy options?