The First Secret

When You Go to See the Wizard, Take Toto

America is a nation of believers, ready to place their faith in . . . workplace fads that inspire revivalist fervor, then fade away.

—Annie Murphy Paul[1]

L EADERS ALL OVER AMERICA KEEP SEARCHING FOR PEOPLE to tell them what to do. Like chronic dieters, anxious parents, eager investors, and earnest seekers of personal growth, they keep searching for the Answer, the Method, the Book, the Seminar—the key that will enable them to inspire their people and transform their organizations. Many make this a habit; they are perennially easy prey for the peddlers of miracle management cures. They are readily found in all fields and certainly in education. But there are exceptions, leaders whom I think of as savvy. Savvy school leaders don't seek

serial saviors. They are often skeptics. They're not full-time skeptics and they're certainly not cynics, but they've learned to be wary of false prophets and promises. They, too, turn to gurus for advice, but rarely. And they know that whenever they do, they should, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, take along a small terrier.

In the film classic, Dorothy, played by Judy Garland, is a Kansas farm girl who is transported to a magical land by a tornado and embarks on a quest to find the Wizard of Oz, hoping he can help her return home. She and her companions, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion, find the Emerald City of Oz and reach the Wizard, but he refuses to help them until they bring him the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West. They do, but he still berates and bullies them until Toto, Dorothy's dog, tugs aside the curtain that hides him, revealing him to be nothing but an old man using tawdry magician's tricks and a microphone. Undone, he blusters, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain." But it's too late. The Wizard, they see, is a "humbug." A savvy leader could have told them.

America has produced a long line of management wizards. Over the past thirty years they have proliferated. Not all have been humbugs, but too many have been gross exaggerators. Many of their prescriptions have not only failed to fulfill their promises, they have turned out to be little more than passing fads. Although veteran educators often think of their field as uniquely prone to faddism—recurring cycles of "reform" in which old ideas keep returning with new names—corporate America is every bit as susceptible to the same phenomenon. Alas, there has been a growing tendency to import popular corporate leadership fads and models into education and to treat leadership itself as a kind of technology, a list of

functions, techniques, and styles. These trends have been seductive to many, but the wisest school leaders have resisted them.

When More Is Less: Leadership Fads

It might seem that the knowledge base about leadership has never been greater. Countless books and articles have been published about it, including thousands about educational leadership alone. More corporate managers than ever have MBA degrees; more school administrators than ever have doctorates. Management is now widely seen as an applied science, and being an executive or administrator has come to mean acquiring and applying a body of theory and a set of skills. These skills are typically seen as portable: once versed in the proper techniques of structuring work and supervising people, and so on, leaders can employ these in a variety of settings: a bank, an insurance company, a hospital—or a school district.

Given all this, one might expect most of our companies, schools, and other organizations to be well run and the need for management advice books to decline. Not so. The books on leadership just keep multiplying. As Peter Vaill has noted, people everywhere continue to find their organizations "mysterious, recalcitrant, intractable, unpredictable, paradoxical, absurd, and—unless it's your own ox getting gored—funny."[2] Scott Adams continues to find fertile ground for his satire of organizational life in his Dilbert comic strip.

Good leadership remains as elusive as it is important; it still resists capture. In this it resembles Justice Potter Stewart's famous characterization of pornography: we know it when we see it, but it's extremely hard to define. Good leadership

can be felt all through an organization, says Warren Bennis. In well-led organizations people feel that they make a significant contribution and that what they do has meaning; that they are part of a team or a family; that mastery and competence matter; that work is exciting and challenging.[3] In well-led organizations morale and commitment are high even in the face of hardship.

But though its impact is palpable, and though most of us feel we know a good leader when we meet one, the essence of leadership remains unclear. Is it a matter of skill or charisma? Of science or art? Of politics or principle? Are its methods universally applicable or situation-specific? Are leaders born or made? The answer to all these questions is, Yes. Leadership appears to be all these and more. Writing in 1985, Bennis and Bert Nanus noted that despite thousands of empirical studies yielding more than 850 definitions of leadership there was still no consensus about it. We still didn't know conclusively what distinguished leaders from nonleaders and strong leaders from weak ones.[4] More than twenty years later, we have even more studies and definitions, but are still no closer to a consensus.

This uncertainty has helped to sustain an enduring market for leadership fads and gurus. As they plan strategy and solve problems, leaders, especially those who want to be up to date, have a propensity to apply methods and techniques that are current in management circles. But as Matthew Stewart and other critics have observed, much of management theory, for all its claims to scientific and empirical gravitas, is essentially a kind of self-help literature. Like popular personal growth and parenting books, popular management and leadership books are faddish: they dress shallow and recycled advice in flashy new names; enjoy, in most cases, a relatively brief celebrity; then

fade away. The fads succeed each other in a kind of carousel, Matthew Stewart says, emphasizing first one theme then another,[5] but none has proven to be an enduring silver bullet.

The gurus' flaws begin with selection bias—they typically generalize broadly from a narrow, hand-picked sample of leaders, describing a certain group of innovators who apparently succeeded using a particular approach or style. But this doesn't prove that all leaders who use this approach or style always succeed, no matter what circumstances they face (a caution that applies to some of the secrets this book recommends, as Chapter Five acknowledges). Similarly, the gurus often confuse correlation with causality. That employees of successful companies are happy, for example, doesn't prove that the companies succeeded because they made their employees happy; it may be that the employees are happy because the company is doing well.

More problematic is the gurus' tendency to adopt criteria for success that are simplistic and ignore or underplay the extent to which organizational success depends upon external factors that are unpredictable and unmanageable. Take, for example, Jim Collins, author of the runaway bestseller *Good to Great* and the dominant management wizard of the twenty-first century's first decade. Collins claimed to have avoided other gurus' methodological errors by, among other steps, analyzing a large range of companies to select eleven that qualified as leaping from good to great and by contrasting these with other similar companies that failed to make this leap. He claimed, too, that the factors he identified that led to their success were "immutable laws of organized human performance," and compared them to the laws of physics.[6]

But Collins's criterion for greatness could hardly have been shallower: stock price. He defined a great company as

one whose stock outperformed the general market by three hundred percent over a fifteen-year period. Is stock price truly *the* proof of leadership and organizational excellence? Do well-led companies always fare well in the market, while poorly led companies always fare poorly? If so, how do we account for the fact that altering Collins's fifteen-year window by just a few months virtually eliminates his companies' exceptional stock performance?[7] Or for the fact that every one of his great companies saw its stock plummet during the 2008–2009 financial meltdown and that two of them, Fannie Mae and Circuit City, not only don't look great anymore, they look awful? Fannie Mae turned out to be abysmally led and was a major contributor to the subprime mortgage disaster that helped ravage the American economy; bailing it out is costing taxpayers billions. As for Circuit City, after being consistently outperformed by its rival Best Buy ever since *Good to Great* appeared, it went out of business. We can't expect Collins to have foreseen the collapse of the economy and its impact on stock prices. We can question his measure of leadership excellence. And we can note that an organization's fortunes—not just its failures but its successes—often depend not just on its leadership but on factors its leadership can neither anticipate nor control. (As Chapter Four will note, these kinds of factors loom especially large in schools.)

An equally serious flaw in the leadership fads, as Stewart points out, is not that the gurus' recommendations are so wrong but that so many are too right, "obvious in the extreme," as a principal friend of mine says. There is no harm in recommending simple or old truths—at least I hope not, as that's some of what this book does. It is something else again to pretend that these are new discoveries or to recommend

empty truisms. Yet too often, as Stewart notes, the supposed experts offer a corporate version of the kind of "toothless wisdom" peddled by self-help writers—"quasi-religious dicta on the virtue of being good at what you do," illustrated by "parables (otherwise known as case studies)," and accompanied by exhortations that boil down to "Think harder!, Work smarter!" and the like.[8] Throughout, the gurus worship fervently and predictably at the altar of innovation, frequently with grandiose inanity. The field is littered with titles like *First Break All the Rules* and *The Pursuit of Wow!* and such pronouncements as "[Our approach] means re-thinking everything, everything!" and "Blow up [your own company] before the competition does."[9]

Finally, in addition to these weaknesses, the popular leadership fads typically have much less relevance to schools than to corporations. They are never developed in—or tailored to—educational settings. Nonetheless they are routinely foisted on school administrators. Since at least the 1980s there has been a predictable life cycle for a school leadership fad:

1. It begins outside of education, developed by management experts from studies of gifted business leaders or, occasionally, by political scientists from studies of gifted historical figures.

2. It gains favor in corporate America and becomes all the rage in management writing. Its key concepts and phrases ("thinking outside the box," "silos," "metrics," "benchmarking," "fox and hedgehog") become commonplace.

3. As it nears what later turns out to have been its peak of popularity, policymakers and professors of education

decide to apply it to schools, even if it has little apparent relevance there.

4. It heats up in educational circles as it cools in the corporate world, showing hitherto unnoticed weaknesses.

5. It is misapplied in education, either through slavish rigidity (failing to modify the model to fit schools' unique characteristics) or false clarity (adopting the nominal form of the innovation but not its true substance).

6. Well after it has lost its cachet in the business world, it lingers on in vestigial form in schools and schools of education until its popularity finally subsides there, too.

Remember Total Quality Management (TQM)? I have long cited it as a textbook example of this life cycle. It took corporate America by storm in the 1980s, and once this happened, it was inevitable that TQM would be applied to schools, even though some of its key concepts, such as "zero defects," simply aren't relevant there. About the time that its popularity began to accelerate in education, articles began to appear in the business press pointing out that TQM was not a panacea after all (among other things, it requires high levels of cooperation among employees, which can sag both when a company falls on hard times and layoffs loom and when employees' jobs are well protected and their motivation is low). Notions of "quality" and "continuous improvement," often ill-defined, are now enshrined in the leadership lexicon, but TQM itself soon lost its luster in management

circles—and then finally in education. Collins's "good to great" approach has been enjoying the same status that TQM once did, but several years ago it started becoming popular among school leaders—superintendents and school heads across the country began having their boards read the book. This suggested to me that it might soon be waning in the corporate world. Sure enough, critics have begun pointing out the flaws noted above, as well as others in Collins's work.

The List of Functions Approach

Despite critiques like mine, there is broad agreement that management is, if not an applied science, a technical profession. Leading any kind of organization is widely understood to be, at least in good part, a learnable list of functions or skills. Researchers study successful managers and build an inventory of tasks or capacities (planning, budgeting, supervision, and so on) that are supposed to capture the essentials of the executive role. In education, the simplest version of this approach has been the following:

1. Find schools where pupils are achieving more than what might be predicted by their backgrounds.

2. Observe principals in those schools and find out what they are doing.

3. Identify these behaviors as "desirable traits."

4. Devise training programs to develop these traits in all principals.

5. Enlist principals in these programs.

This model, as Roland Barth has pointed out, is straight-forward, compelling, logical—and surprisingly ineffective, because conditions in one school are seldom similar to those in another[10] and, as we shall see below, because few people can readily develop new traits and shed old ones.

A more complex version of this approach creates elaborate functional classifications. A typical example I came across years ago was a manual, *Principals for Our Changing Schools*. Its creators began with both a "task analysis of the principalship," results of which were reviewed by focus groups of administrators, and a "conceptual model and 'Taxonomy of Standards'" developed by academics. It then integrated the two, had this composite reviewed by industrial psychologists and further refined by other experts, and ultimately produced a model of the principalship that divides it into four major themes (organizational, programmatic, interpersonal, and contextual) and twenty-one separate performance domains. States have followed suit. Massachusetts, for example, adopted regulations for the evaluation of administrators that identify six general "principles of effective administrative leadership," covering twenty-seven different areas reflected in ninety-two descriptors of ideal behaviors and skills.[11]

Embedded in these taxonomies, notes Thomas Sergiovanni, is the expectation that the leader be adept at applying three sources of authority:

1. *Bureaucratic*. This emphasizes formal position and official power. It relies on rules and regulations, roles and expectations. It assumes that supervisors are more expert than staff and that accountability should

be external. Sergiovanni summarizes this approach to leadership as "expect and inspect."[12]

2. *Technical*. This emphasizes logic and research and prizes technical knowledge and objective evidence over experience and personal judgment. It relies on research data to shape practice in standardized ways, and calls for careful monitoring and supervision, but it appeals to expertise. I would summarize this approach as "logic and research."

3. *Psychological*. This emphasizes cooperation and communication and rests on interpersonal skill and motivational technique. It presumes that although staff and management have different priorities, their differences can be negotiated and compromised. Management's goals will be better accomplished if staff needs are met. Sergiovanni sees the primary leadership strategy here as "expect and reward."[13]

Generally, these three sources of authority are used in conjunction with one another. Although there are periodic proposals of so-called "one-best-way" models of leadership (such as TQM), many management experts agree that no single form of leading is optimal for all settings. Rather, they suggest that different kinds of organizations require different kinds of management and, more important, that managers within a given setting need to be able to apply a range of skills as the particular context requires.

As applied to school administration, this technical approach has enhanced leaders' organizational skills and helped them create more respectful and democratic school

climates. And no leader can survive without certain core techniques, both subtle and blunt. But though management-as-technique has come to be taken for granted as sound administrative practice, its flaws are significant.

Its chief problem is that treating leadership as a list of functions or skills simply doesn't match up with real life. In daily life, no one experiences her job as a list of functions or domains or herself as a list of competencies. Leadership is a matter of a whole person in a whole environment interacting in concrete ways with other whole persons in the immediacy and unpredictability of the moment.[14] Inventories and taxonomies of leadership simply fail to capture this complexity. They miss "the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts . . . the real-world, day-to-day action" of school leaders.[15] It's not that the particular functions or skills are irrelevant, but that the business of actually leading cannot be reduced to a list. In addition, the lists are endless. As the complexities of organizational life multiply, experts keep enlarging the leadership catalogue: more domains, more tasks, more techniques; more to do, more to learn. The cure has become another part of the problem because it requires yet more from the overtaxed leader.

The List of Styles Approach

The extension of the list of functions approach is the list of styles approach, or as I think of it, the Myers-Briggs Fallacy. Ever since situational leadership gained wide popularity in management theory and training in the 1990s,[16] interpersonal flexibility has been enshrined as a primary leadership virtue. The ideal leader is seen as having a rich repertoire of people skills and can thus respond effectively to a wide variety of

situations and issues. The various skills themselves are usually grouped into constellations and defined as leadership styles. Advocates of situational leadership see a leader as preferring a predominant style based on his experience, education, and training—but also as flexible. He can learn to adapt his style to the requirements of different situations. This brings us to the pinnacle of the style movement and, for me, the peak of folly in the whole realm of leadership-as-technique: The Myers-Briggs.

It is hard to find a school administrator who has not attended a workshop on the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) or a similar "style workshop." The MBTI and its imitators have participants answer questions about themselves and score their answers on various scales, from which they then sort themselves into different types. The workshop that follows aims to help them learn more about their particular styles and those of others with whom they work, and develop ways to communicate better by modifying these styles. To most school leaders, even those who haven't attended such a workshop, "knowledge and skill about how to motivate, apply the correct leadership style, boost morale, and engineer the right interpersonal climate [are] the 'core technology' of the education administration profession."[17] Just as a good teacher should have a repertoire of instructional strategies so as to match the learning styles of each of her students, so an administrator should have a flexible inventory of leadership approaches that generate the right results from different constituents. Unfortunately, the MBTI and the larger leadership style edifice are built on a house of cards.

Despite its popularity, the MBTI has no scientific basis. Its creators, who had no psychometric credentials, based it on the theories of Carl Jung, which, to put it mildly, are not

widely accepted within the field of psychology. Studies keep showing that the test fails the basic scientific requirements of reliability and validity. This is hardly surprising, because the MBTI assumes that the test takers themselves are their own best judges. The test produces a "reported type," but a so-called "best fit process" allows test takers to modify this— to choose their own type if they dislike the test results. In addition, it turns out that many people's types vary according to the time of the day they take the MBTI and that those who retake it often end up being assigned to a different type the second time.[18]

But it is perhaps the MBTI's most fundamental flaw that, ironically, may account for its popularity, a phenomenon psychologists call "the subjective validation effect," or the Forer Effect: our tendency to accept as accurate descriptions of our personalities that are so general that they could apply to many people.[19] Sixty years ago, psychologist Bertram Forer administered to university students a test he told them was a measure of personality, ignored their answers, then distributed to each student the "evaluation" that had supposedly emerged from his or her responses, and asked each to rate the evaluation's accuracy. The students were amazed at the test's precision; their average rating was 4.2 out of a possible 5. The problem? Forer had given all the students exactly the same description, one he had taken from a newspaper astrology column. Versions of this experiment have been widely repeated, with the recipients' average ratings consistently hovering around 4.2 out of 5.

The issues here, of course, are not just the weaknesses of the MBTI and other style "tests" but the larger misunderstanding and misuse of the concept of leadership style now so prevalent in school circles. It is quite true that we *have* different

styles; it is entirely false to suggest we can *change* our styles. We all have our own habits, tendencies, beliefs, and values; there is no way to disguise these from those with whom we work closely over a sustained period of time.[20] This is not to say we can't profit from learning about different styles. Within limits, we can. Doing so can help us not to take personally behavior that we dislike in others; every now and then we may remind ourselves that it is just their style, not, say, deliberate disrespect. And I have seen some work groups that were suffering severe, basic dysfunctions benefit from talking about styles as an introductory, ice-breaking step on the road to conflict resolution. But style is rooted in personality. It is inborn and unchangeable. We may change *what* we think and believe but not *how* we think and believe. We may undergo a religious conversion, leaving one faith and joining another, and this may be life altering and cause a profound change in our outlook on life, but we will be the same *kind* of believer in the second denomination that we were in the first.

Even if it were possible to change styles, this would only complicate and weaken leadership. It would give the leader yet more to do. Trying to master the style catalogue is itself an additional burden, one that fosters the stress-inducing expectation that a good leader can—and should—be all things to all people, regularly adapting his behavior to meet the styles of others. This reduces him to following everyone else. Moreover, responding to a wide range of situations in a variety of different ways necessarily makes a leader seem inconsistent and thus harder to follow. Even worse, leaders who base their practice on styles frequently come across not just as inconsistent but as insincere and artificial, as studied and calculated, rather than spontaneous and genuine.[21] No leadership style seminar turns an anxious, controlling principal who

cannot delegate tasks into a confident, trusting principal who shares responsibility. At best, it may help turn him into an anxious, controlling principal who is *trying to act* confident and trusting. But he won't be inspiring confidence or trust. Imagine that you are having a lively discussion with your boss about an important issue when it suddenly dawns on you that he is applying a technique to you. If you are like most people, your instant response is to draw back; a gap has suddenly arisen between you. His words now take on a different meaning. Leadership that is *based on* techniques and styles is actually not leadership. It is manipulation, and it is ultimately self-defeating.

Learning and Leading from Strength

None of this denies the importance of leaders' learning, changing, growing, and applying skills. It's not as if savvy principals, school heads, and superintendents refuse to read books or attend conferences or try new approaches. They do all of these things. But as I noted at the outset, they generally don't go looking for gurus and wizards. And when they do seek advice, they don't lose their bearings; they adapt what they adopt.

One plot summary of *The Wizard of Oz* describes the Wizard as solving the problems of Dorothy and her companions "through common sense and a little double talk . . . suggesting that, in fact, they had what they were searching for all along."[22] Now and then, common sense and a little double talk are probably helpful in leading any organization. But what really makes leaders savvy is knowing what they have— that is, knowing themselves. They use new inputs to adjust their own approaches but they unapologetically modify these

new methods to "fit who I am," as one superintendent says. They learn—and lead—from strength.

We will explore this concept in depth in Chapter Five. For now, we can note that contrary to conventional wisdom, the leaders of high-performing organizations are not would-be "stylemasters." Rather, they tend to be people of strong character with strong commitments who maximize their strengths. Responsible organizational experts keep pointing out that when we look at successful organizations we find a wide range of styles among their leaders. Peter Vaill has captured this vividly: "There are tyrants whose almost maniacal commitment to achieving the system's purposes makes one think that they'd be locked up. . . . There are warm, laid-back parent figures who hardly seem to be doing anything at all, until one looks a little more closely. There are technocrats . . . and dreamers. . . . Some are rah-rah optimists and others are dour critics who express their love for the system by enumerating its imperfections."[23]

It was fifteen years ago that I first read Vaill's summary, but I still recall the impact it had on me. Though he was describing corporate settings, I realized immediately that the same thing was true in the schools where I worked. It has remained true in the years since. The leaders of top districts and schools are by no means all similar: some are intensely hands-on, others are great delegators; some don't hesitate to criticize poor performance, others accentuate the positive; some care mostly about basic skills, others about higher-order ones. What they share in common is self-knowledge and commitment. Not long after I read Vaill's description I gathered a group of principals from high-achieving schools to discuss their different approaches to leadership. As we were finishing up, one of them said simply, "We're obviously different,

but we each know ourselves and we each know what we're about."

Savvy leaders illustrate a truth with tremendous liberating potential, one we will explore in later chapters: there are many ways to lead successfully. They know that the key is not to chase some ideal—a composite list of virtues from the management bookshelf—but to be the very best of who they are.