

Chapter 1

Introduction to the High-Payoff Strategies

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Effective education leaders are important and impactful. They are responsible for leading teaching and learning throughout a school or an entire school district. They are central to how well teachers facilitate instruction and how much students learn. Education leaders therefore influence the quality of students' present and future lives and indeed the quality of the future citizenry of the community, state, and nation.

This book is the result of input from hundreds of education leaders (urban, suburban, and rural) during the past twenty years. They have described how they have successfully led important changes in their schools, organizations, and districts—and what challenges remain about which they would like advice and models. They are also asking for resources from others who have had success in bringing about changes that have made their districts and schools more effective as learning organizations not only for the students but also for the adults who work there as well. This book offers just that.

Often referred to as “second only to teaching” among school-related factors influencing student learning, leaders influence the conditions under which all instruction takes place and, therefore, have an even greater impact than that. For, although most school variables, considered separately, have small effects on learning, effective leadership can pull the pieces together into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. And several surveys of teachers have found that the number one factor that affects their satisfaction—or lack thereof—is school leadership.

When teachers are more satisfied, they teach better and student learning increases. Researchers at the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto demonstrated empirically the link between school leadership and improved student achievement. In fact, the research found that “to date ... we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9). The role of school leaders at all levels is important indeed.

FOCUS ON HIGH-PAYOFF STRATEGIES

An education leader's job can be overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be! What we learn from research and successful leaders is that spending time on high-payoff strategies is the best way to get the biggest bang for the buck. There are so many things to get done; it is of utmost importance to make distinctions between what needs to be done personally by the leader and what can be done by others.

Educators are often bad at making these distinctions among their plentiful tasks—they're all important to the functioning of the school or district, right? Indeed, they are, but the leader does not have to—and should not—do them all personally. An education leader is not a soloist but rather the conductor of an orchestra in which talented professionals contribute varied instruments and skills. In order to achieve this aim, two things have to happen. The leader has to identify high-payoff strategies and then devote time and attention to them—delegating other activities.

What are high-payoff strategies? Those that get the biggest results from the effort expended and pave the way to other important changes. For example, this means that education leaders need to support primarily the learning needs of the *adults* who work in schools—as opposed to the students. Although most education leaders have had gratifying and successful experiences as educators of students, the role of leaders is to mobilize the talents of the adults, who in turn work with the students. Effective leaders influence others, motivating them to contribute to the goals of the school and district.

The Starting Points

Perhaps the most important aspect of being an effective leader are having a clear vision and being relentless in its pursuit. It is essential to clearly articulate the endgame and be consistent in aligning everything that happens to getting this done. It is, further, crucial to keep at it despite the obstacles that will undoubtedly come up. Persistence is essential.

This includes ongoing monitoring of progress and midcourse corrections that will become necessary as events progress.

As the saying goes, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.” Starting with a vision is imperative to leading the school or district toward success. Having a vision is meant to inspire and mobilize everyone toward the aim of high expectations for all members of the school community, especially high achievement for the students. Formulating a vision involves widespread consultation, communication, and commitment across the community.

Once the vision is clear to the leader and to the community, the effective leader personally engages, encourages the active engagement and leadership of others, aligns resources to the vision, and monitors its accomplishment through the use of data and milestones. Once the vision and focus are clear, there are three well-known, high-payoff strategies identified by research and successful principals to use in leading change in schools and districts:

- Creating a culture supportive of teaching and learning
- Leading instructional improvements
- Facilitating learning communities

Creating a Culture Supportive of Teaching and Learning

Culture represents the shared values of everyone in the school or district and how those are expressed in everything that is done on a daily basis. This is sometimes also called *climate*. It enables all staff to be part of a community striving for similar group goals—focused on student learning—through the work they each do individually and on various teams.

A culture develops organically, but it also can be led. People’s real values find expression as well as those instruction-centered values deliberately infused by the leader. Research shows that principals of schools with high teacher ratings for “instructional climate are also principals who rank

highest when it comes to developing an atmosphere of caring and trust” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 77).

In addition, researchers at Vanderbilt University have found that “the research over the last quarter century has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students, and for raising the overall academic standards of all students” (Porter et al., 2008, p. 13).

Some aspects of culture are clearly visible (such as bulletin boards, shared language and history, and assemblies and other ceremonies and rituals). Other characteristics are evident when one knows what to look for (such as norms of staff and student behavior). Still, many cultural traits are hidden and based on assumptions that aren’t spoken but are acted on. These include the real values (as opposed to those that are espoused or given lip service) and beliefs (such as whether all children are capable of high achievement). Beliefs have the most influence on the functioning of the school or district—yet they are the most difficult to identify and even more difficult, although not impossible, to change. There are many ways that great school leaders inculcate a vision into daily life of the school: celebrating teacher and student success, modeling the values that are important, and bringing student and staff opinions into decision making.

Leading Instructional Improvements

At the heart of the mission of all schools and districts is excellent instruction on the part of the educators and insightful and useful learning on the part of the students. Clearly, improving teaching and learning consistently throughout the school and district is a high-payoff strategy for any education leader. Because this mission has to be achieved through mobilizing the talents of tens—if not hundreds—of educators who collectively teach thousands, this is challenging work indeed because it encompasses skills development and implementation on both group and individual levels.

Educational success requires leadership skills including knowledge of current standards and content and development of leaders who have these

attributes; knowledge of how to effectively conduct instruction (pedagogy); and the ability to lead the planning, implementation, and evaluation of large-scale strategies to identify and address the strengths and development opportunities of all staff on individual and group levels. It is important that the development of such activities widely and actively engage educators in collaborative planning.

Great leaders are thought partners with teachers in improving curriculum and instructional practices. They visit classrooms, not to monitor but as a source for coaching and mentoring ideas. They provide substantive feedback to teachers and participate in grade-level or subject-specific planning meetings.

Facilitating Learning Communities

Another high-payoff strategy for leaders that directly correlates with improving student achievement is developing and conducting ongoing learning communities for the school and district educators. In many ways, this strategy is the culmination of having created the culture and activities for improving teaching and learning. This strategy is ongoing and results oriented: the community defines and contributes model practices, tools, curriculum, or other agreed-on products for use by the community and for others in the school or district.

Research demonstrates that when leaders foster such learning communities, instruction and student achievement improves. “Leadership effects on student achievement occur largely because leadership strengthens professional community—a special environment in which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning Professional community, in turn, is a strong predictor of instructional practices that are strongly associated with student achievement” (Louis et. al., 2010, p. 37).

The characteristics of such a community are that it be an integral part of the school and district’s overall mission, whereby lessons are jointly developed between the leaders and other educators. There must be an ongoing series of coordinated learning activities for a defined set

of committed members with a specific purpose and outcomes that meet a predetermined strategic objective. Therefore, essential practices include ensuring a climate of trust and respect, making sure there is immediate application of learning to solve common problems, contributing knowledge and evidence to the common work, and creating learning that is responsive to developing needs.

BUILDING BLOCKS THAT MAKE HIGH-PAYOFF STRATEGIES WORK

Once leaders have selected a high-payoff strategy to pursue, research and practitioners have identified three building blocks needed to get the desired results:

- Get buy-in: “We’re all in this together.”
Principals report that staff often thinks everything is the principal’s problem to solve. It is really the opposite. Effective leaders communicate that there are roles for everyone. It’s everyone’s job to help students learn, although each person may play a different role. Research supports this contention. “Compared with lower-achieving schools, higher-achieving schools provided all stakeholders with greater influence on decisions. Principals willing to share leadership benefit from the collective knowledge and wisdom in their school communities” (Louis et al, 2010, p. 35).
- Start with an early win.
Momentum can be gained by starting off with an early demonstration of concrete results to persuade doubters that there is benefit in the chosen approach. Leaders will want to identify an activity that is valued by those involved that can be accomplished within the first month of the new work. The early win should be tangible and observable: non-threatening to those who may oppose the larger strategy and perceived by most people to have more benefits than costs.

The results should be symbolic of something highly valued by most group members and publicized so all become convinced that this work is achievable and will lead to the accomplishment of the larger strategy.

- Provide ongoing support.

A common mistake leaders make is to initiate important changes and assume that those who are involved in the new work have the skills to carry them out. That might (or might not) be true at the beginning—but it is assuredly not the case moving forward. Skills development is not a one-time occurrence. Once something is learned, it doesn't mean that someone has that skill forever. Change is continual; we must all continually refresh our skills and perspectives—staying ahead of the curve.

Everyone, no matter how experienced, needs continual support in the forms of coaching, feedback, and professional development. Professional athletes know this, which is why they have a full complement of coaches and ongoing training.

A WORD ABOUT EFFECTIVE CHANGE LEADERSHIP

Ultimately, this book is about leading change effectively to improve education for students and the adults who provide their instruction. It relies on techniques that have been discussed in a variety of sources, including this author's 2011 book, *Leading Change Step-by-Step: Tactics, Tools, and Tales*.

The high-payoff strategies are—at their heart—change strategies. This is crucial to consider because change has distinctive characteristics that require specific leadership techniques. *Change* in this case means something different from what is—change is a moving target, constant and continuous. It is a series of destinations that lead to further destinations. Therefore, defining milestones along the way is important or the leader will be working endlessly toward an out-of-reach goal.

In addition, change makes most people anxious. They wonder if they will have the needed skills—and also tend to hear the need to change as

blaming. “If I was doing a good job, why am I being asked to change?” Because change is something different, the outcome cannot be predicted with 100 percent certainty. Therefore, it is of importance to prove the value of the new effort as soon as possible. This is often accomplished by purposefully building in an early win as described in this chapter.

Finally, because the outcome can’t be predicted with certainty, leading change requires constant monitoring and revision. This requires a mind-set that it is not a mistake if course corrections have to be made—that is to be expected of a good change process. As district and school leaders use these techniques over several years, the importance of the various steps becomes apparent.

Beginning any effort to disrupt the status quo (the type of change we are after) must begin with assessing the readiness of all those involved to pursue this endeavor. Is everyone able to demonstrate the enthusiasm and skills to try—and keep at it? Will they be able to put any previous, bad experiences aside? Of course this applies as much to the leader as to the participants.

If people’s readiness is low, it doesn’t mean scrapping the initiative; it just means that the leader needs to provide lots of structure in what is proposed: for example, agendas, templates, and guidelines. Once participants experience success by using the structured activities, they will be ready for more autonomy. It is unfortunate that many leaders do not take this first step. Omit it at your peril! Those who do not assess and accommodate readiness often have to return to square one after much unproductive wheel-spinning.

It is then essential to assess the motivations of the various groups and individuals whose support will be needed—or who have the power to thwart the effort. Strategies should be designed to engage those whose support is necessary. Try to minimize resistance but be prepared to tolerate some. Engage people in collaborative planning and always keep an eye on the sustainability of what is being accomplished. Even if the work is successful, it won’t mean much if it doesn’t last. And, remember that

change is continual. It is therefore essential to periodically reassess how things are going with an eye to tweaking or even changing course.

Leading any effective change process requires the ongoing analysis of accurate and timely data. What you measure matters! And, it is important to use multiple measures every time. Most of us have opinions—but do we have the *evidence* to support them or are we making assumptions based exclusively on our own ways of looking at the world? In order to ensure that we have a realistic picture of all aspects of whatever issue is being addressed, it is necessary to have data from a variety of sources to inform the discussion and decisions.

Often, however, the hardest thing to do when leading change is to identify the high-payoff strategy to pursue. Leaders need to identify where they want to go and what strategy will best take them there. In this book, that important first step is accomplished.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book details three high-payoff strategies by which effective education leaders get results and how the building blocks described in this chapter come into play—building effective change leadership in each. The descriptions include examples of how successful leaders have put the strategy into action, and each strategy references a video that follows two principals who are using the strategy. The high-payoff strategy chapters also describe what can get in the way of success. Forewarned is forearmed!

Chapter 2 sets the foundation for all the strategies—how to set the vision and develop an unrelenting focus. There are descriptions, videos, and a tool.

Chapters 3 through 8 are paired chapters; each pair describes one of the high-payoff strategies. The first chapter of the pair describes the strategy, gives examples of how effective leaders have used it, references a video of it in action, and provides guidance on what can go wrong. The second chapter for each high-payoff strategy provides a tool by which data can

be gathered and methods of data analysis that can contribute to planning strategy.

Chapter 9 provides specific examples of how successful education leaders have combined all three high-payoff strategies to achieve their visions.

Also included are suggestions for using the book's content in courses and workshops for education leaders as well as an annotated bibliography of sources.