IT’S PEOPLE, NOT PROGRAMS
FREE READING PACK FOR LEADERS
INTRODUCTION

Leaders, start the school year off right with this reading pack featuring chapters from books by Todd Whitaker! In this pack, you’ll learn:

- Why people, not programs, are the determining factor in significantly improving your school;
- How to figure out which of your employees are essential to leading school change and how to make the most of these key players;
- How to deal with difficult parents by supporting your teachers and other staff members when they come under criticism of parents; and
- How to motivate your difficult teachers.

As a BONUS, enclosed is a study guide for the book Your First Year: How to Survive and Thrive as a New Teacher by Todd Whitaker, Katherine Whitaker, and Madeline Whitaker for your teachers who are just beginning their careers!

Happy reading!

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Outstanding principals know that if they have great teachers, they have a great school; without great teachers, they do not have a great school. More importantly, all of their audiences take the same view. If my third-grade daughter has a great teacher, I think highly of her school. If her teacher is not great, I see her school as less than stellar no matter how many awards she wins, no matter how many students earn high test scores, and no matter how many plaques adorn the main office. Students share this perspective. If a high-school sophomore has four great teachers each day (out of four!), then believe me, that sophomore will think the school is great. As the quality of teachers drops, so does a student’s opinion of the school. All the way from kindergarten through college, the quality of the teachers determines our perceptions of the quality of the school.

TWO WAYS TO IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS

School improvement is actually a very simple concept, but it is not easy to accomplish. There are really two ways to improve a school significantly: Get better teachers or improve the teachers you already have.

We can spend a great deal of time and energy looking for programs that will solve our problems, but these programs frequently do not bring the improvement or growth we seek. Instead, we must focus on what really matters. It is never about programs, it is always about people. This does not mean that programs cannot encourage or support improvement of educators; however, no program inherently leads to that improvement. Believe me, if there were a program that could succeed regardless of teacher quality, it would already be in place in every one of our schools.

Each of us can think of many innovations that were touted as the answer in education. Too often, we expect them to solve all our woes. When they do not, we see them as the problem. However, we must keep in mind that programs are not the solution, and they are rarely the problem. If we cling to the belief that programs are the solution or the problem, we will continually lose sight of what really makes a difference. Back to basics, whole language, 1:1 technology, direct instruction, assertive discipline, response to intervention, open classrooms, the Baldridge model, professional learning communities, state standards, mission statements, goal setting, site-based management: There is nothing inherently right or wrong with any of these ideas. We may have a fondness for one that has met with success, or deep-seated resentment because another has been forced down people’s throats. If we take a closer look at some examples, however, we might see what effective principals never forget: It is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school.

HOW OPEN CLASSROOMS GOT STARTED

Some of you may know the true history of the open classroom movement. I do not claim any expertise about this topic—but for what it’s worth, I’ll share my vision of how the concept took off.

The scene is an elementary school in Anywhere, USA. At the faculty meeting just before the start of school, the principal announces that he has good news and bad news. The good news: Enrollment is higher than anticipated. The bad news: He needs a teacher to volunteer to teach in the old auxiliary gymnasium. Awkward silence;
every teacher avoids eye contact with the principal. Finally, someone raises her hand
to volunteer—and not surprisingly, it’s Mrs. Smith, the school’s best teacher.

Some teachers, in her shoes, might block off a classroom-sized rectangle and
keep the students inside it. But this dynamic teacher uses every inch of space, even
creating homey nooks and crannies. Then (as often happens in rapidly growing
schools), within weeks the principal makes another announcement: He needs to
move another class into the gym.

After a little hemming and hawing, guess who raises her hand? The second best
teacher in the school, Mrs. Jones. Together, these outstanding teachers create a
phenomenal environment in that old musty gym—so much excitement, energy, and
engagement in learning that it gives you goose bumps just to walk in.

Later that year, visitors to Anywhere Elementary School walk around to all the
classrooms. Where do they see the best teaching and learning? That’s right! In
the old auxiliary gym. They conclude that open classrooms are the secret to good
teaching—and the rest is history.

Ironically, the cycle has come around; now everyone looks askance at open
classrooms. Granted, some teachers—especially those who lack solid classroom
management skills—may struggle in this environment. What’s more, the noise they
and their students generate may keep anyone else from sharing space with them
effectively. And yet for some of the most dynamic and creative teachers, the open
classroom may easily be the best teaching environment.

What really energized the Anywhere Elementary School gym was the presence of
excellent teachers, not the absence of walls dividing their classrooms. As leaders,
we must understand that programs are not solutions. We must adopt changes only if
they make our teachers better. Here is another all-too-common example involving a
classroom management approach.

ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE: THE PROBLEM OR THE SOLUTION?

Classroom management is a common topic for debate. Most of us know of schools
that mandate or outlaw certain approaches. Writers and conference speakers on the
topic of classroom management often take a similarly polarizing view, hailing certain
classroom management techniques as the best, the most appropriate, while rejecting
others as inherently inappropriate in our schools.

I’d like to describe two scenarios involving one of these approaches: assertive
discipline. All of us are probably familiar with some version of assertive discipline.
Typically, if a student misbehaves the teacher writes the student’s name on the
board. If the same student misbehaves again, the teacher puts a checkmark by
the name. For each instance of inappropriate behavior, the teacher adds another
checkmark. Specific, predetermined consequences apply for various numbers
of checkmarks.

Some people swear by this approach; others swear at it. I have worked with many
schools and districts that require assertive discipline and many that officially oppose
it. I believe that these schools and districts, in viewing assertive discipline as either a
solution or a problem, have lost sight of the critical factor: the teacher.
Mrs. Hamilton was the best teacher I ever worked with. I had the good fortune to spend seven years in the same school with her as an assistant principal and then principal.

During that time, I made at least two hundred informal visits to her classroom. In a casual conversation just before I moved out of state to take another position, Mrs. Hamilton mentioned that she was thinking of not using assertive discipline in her class the next year. I was stunned; I had never known that she used assertive discipline. Why did I not know? Well, I rarely saw anyone’s name on the board, and I never noticed a student’s name with a checkmark beside it. Her classroom management skills were as polished as her teaching.

Mrs. Hamilton did not see assertive discipline as a necessary classroom management approach. However, if before she came to her own conclusions, I had decided that assertive discipline was wrong and banned it from our school, would that have helped her as a teacher? If assertive discipline gave her confidence, then the students and our school were better for it.

Now, you may be thinking that assertive discipline seems to be the best approach. Of course, if this were true, every teacher would use it and thrive in their classrooms. Well, I’d like you to meet Mr. Lewis, a teacher from my first year as a principal.

In the second week of school, I decided to make the rounds of my teachers’ classrooms. At twenty-six—younger than every teacher in the school—I was a little hesitant to visit classes, but I knew that this was the best way to help improve instruction. So, I walked into Mr. Lewis’s third-period English class. I quickly realized that he was quite familiar with assertive discipline. On the board were the names of about a dozen students. The last one was Ricky—written in letters a foot high, with at least five checkmarks, each one larger than the one before. The last checkmark was three feet tall from point to tip. At the board, hunched over like a leprechaun, Mr. Lewis was aggressively gesturing toward the student, “Come on! You want another one?”

Clearly, assertive discipline was not working here. I might have tried to find a “better” technique, but this would merely have placed a new, equally ineffective bandage over the same gaping wound. Assertive discipline was not the problem; Mr. Lewis was the problem. On the other hand, while assertive discipline was not a problem in Mrs. Hamilton’s classroom, neither was it the solution. Mrs. Hamilton was the solution.

Educators have seen this pattern repeated many times. The whole-language–phonics debate offers another example. When we took basal readers away from every single teacher, we took away the support that some teachers needed just to survive in the classroom. However, by requiring all teachers to center on phonetics, we may have lost some of the best instruction that others had to offer.

All principals are aware that the students in their schools have individual needs. Great principals are even more aware that their faculty members vary in their individual abilities. Effective principals focus on the people in their schools. They see programs as solutions only when the programs bring out the best in their teachers.

INDIVIDUAL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

In one of the studies of principals described previously, teachers in the more effective principals’ schools reported that their leaders encouraged and supported individual
staff development (Whitaker, 1997). Regardless of the need for and commitment
to whole-school growth, these principals did everything they could to promote
the effectiveness of each individual staff member as a way to improve the school.
Ineffective principals paid much less attention to individual growth. Instead, they
focused their efforts on whole-school goals and issues. As school leaders, we must
recognize that no matter what programs we introduce or seek to strengthen, our
most important work is to improve the people in our schools. Nothing makes as
much difference as the quality of our teachers.

REWARDS: PUNISHMENT OR ENCOURAGEMENT?

Much attention has been given recently to the debate over praise and rewards
for students. Like many issues, its merits cannot be decided by discussion alone.
Otherwise, by now we would know whether praising or rewarding students actually
motivates them to do better. Some of our best teachers praise or reward their
students, but so do some of our least effective teachers. What matters is not whether
they do it, but how appropriately and effectively they do it.

Ineffective teachers and leaders consistently think they can force or bribe others to
do what they want. We all know the diminishing returns of this approach. Effective
people build relationships, so then others are eager to please them. As a leader,
you must make every effort to understand what the deciding factors are or, to be
more precise, who the deciding factors are. Effective principals focus on people,
not programs.

Great principals never forget that it is people, not programs, who
determine the quality of a school.
As we set out to improve the dynamics in our organization, we need to understand the makeup of the people in the group. This understanding helps with every task of leadership, but it is critical when change is on the agenda.

Now of course we recognize that every employee in a school is important. When we embark on change, however, we must figure out which of our employees are essential and how to make the most of these key players. Their support paves the way to wider acceptance and buy-in for our goals. Even before we start planning for a strong first exposure, we must determine who matters most.

**THREE TYPES OF EMPLOYEES**

I’m convinced that one of the essential components—if not the essential component—of leading change is to understand the informal dynamics of a group. There are many ways to break these down. Dr. Al Burr (1993), a former school administrator, offered a valuable perspective on teacher dynamics. He divided employees into three groups: Superstars, Backbones, and Mediocres. In the book Six Types of Teachers (2005), Fiore and Whitaker sort these into three similar categories, each with two subcategories. Their main groupings are the Irreplaceables, the Solids, and the Replacement Level.

Each of these groupings will apply in any profession. In a restaurant, you will find three types of wait staff; at a hospital, three types of medical professionals; at a bank, three types of tellers and three types of loan officers. The categories also apply to other staff members in a school district—bus drivers, cooks, custodians, and guidance counselors, as well as principals and assistant principals. However, for the purpose of understanding the dynamics, let’s examine the categories as they apply to teachers.

**SUPERSTARS / IRREPLACEABLES**

To reach the lofty level of the irreplaceable superstar, a teacher must earn the esteem of four groups: students, parents, peers, and principals.

- If you ask students to name their best teachers, this teacher’s name comes up quite often.
- Parents often request (or at least wish) that their child have this teacher. The word gets around the school community that his classroom serves the needs of students well.
- Peers respect this teacher as a colleague, role model, and informal leader.
- If this teacher left the school, the principal would find it difficult to hire someone as good, and the departure would matter beyond the walls of her classroom.

A lofty standard indeed, but this is truly a rare group of professionals. In a typical organization, about 2 to 10 percent of employees count as irreplaceable. In a school, you might find one or two superstars—if you’re lucky, a handful to a dozen. That’s pretty heady stuff.

**BACKBONES / SOLIDS**

Backbones typically make up 80 to 90 percent of an organization. There are lots of different ways to think of this group; perhaps the easiest is this. If two or three
backbones left our school, we would most likely break even in replacing them. Sometimes we would do a little better, sometimes a little worse. That doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t be challenges. We may think, “Where are we going to find someone who can teach high school biology and coach junior varsity girls’ volleyball?” Or “Who can we get to sponsor Student Council—no one likes to do that!”

Some of these backbones rank among our most supportive faculty members. Further, they do much of the work in our organization simply because they comprise such a large percentage of the staff. As individuals, the solids might have some characteristics we would greatly miss, along with some quirks or traits that we could easily do without. They may even have some of the traits needed to be a superstar or irreplaceable, but they come up short in at least one area to qualify for that category.

**MEDIOCRES / REPLACEMENT LEVEL**

Our mediocre employees hold down the other end of the bell-shaped curve from the superstars—typically 5 to 10 percent of our faculty and staff. This is the teacher that parents probably don’t prefer for their child; this is the secretary who tends to arrive late and leave early; this is the coach who typically blames the refs when the team doesn’t win. In short, if a mediocre left, we could easily find someone better to fill that slot.

There’s nothing mean-spirited about recognizing this fact. And since the if is a big if—because given their shortcomings, they’re not likely to find a better job offer at another school—we will need to work with them in our setting to lead change effectively. Examples of these employees appear in scenarios later in the book, and we’ll explore approaches to dealing with them in Chapter 9, *Reinforce Changed Behaviors and New Efforts*.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY ORGANIZATION?**

We will save the details for a later time, but outlining a few characteristics of employee types now can help you understand the dynamics they create no matter where they work. You may want to spend a few minutes identifying which people in your setting fit into each category and then make a list of adjectives that describe individuals in each of these groups. Over the years, I have found that people come up with similar responses. Typical lists include the following:

- **Superstars / Irreplaceables**—good communicator, initiator, visionary, risk-taker; caring, positive, knowledgeable, energetic, creative, dynamic; has a sense of humor, loves teaching; puts students first.

- **Backbones / Solids**—hard worker; dedicated, loyal, productive, knowledgeable, consistent; follows directions; likes teaching; tries hard.

- **Mediocres / Replacement Level**—slacker, cynic; negative, incompetent, sarcastic; resists change; knows the contract word for word; has poor attendance record, lacks classroom management skills.

At one workshop, a principal noted that the backbone group could have all the qualities of the superstar if we just added “for the most part.” In other words, they are positive most of the time, generally put students first, and so on. We’ll see examples of these dynamics at work in our schools as we explore additional strategies.
However, here I’d like to highlight a couple of reasons why we must have a clear view of these dynamics. They involve two critical differences among our groups of mediocres, backbones, and superstars.

**HOW BROAD IS THEIR VISION?**

Think about the superstars in your organization. How broad is their vision? In my experience, the irreplaceable teachers take in the whole setting. In everything they do, in every decision they make, they envision its effects throughout the school. They may even consider the district-wide, statewide, or worldwide impact.

How broad is the vision of the backbones in your organization? In my experience, it is often limited by their classroom walls. The solid teachers consider decisions and view potential changes in terms of how it will directly affect them, their teaching practices, and their students.

How broad is the vision of the mediocres in your organization? As big as a mirror: They think of themselves. Replacement-level teachers typically make decisions and respond to change by asking, “What difference does this make for me?” Not “for my students” or “for my department” or “for my grade level,” but “What does it mean for me?” Of course, not every individual in each of these categories always thinks this way, but this is the vision that tends to set their horizons. Once we recognize these differences, we can take them into account as we make decisions and manage the everyday routine. They become crucially important as we seek to implement change. So too does one other essential difference among the groups: the locus of the impetus for change.

**WHERE IS THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE?**

Where does the impetus for change come from in each of these groups? In my experience, superstars have an internal impetus for change. They monitor their practices to get a sense of whether they work. If this reflection suggests that another approach might work better, they adjust accordingly.

Backbones, on the other hand, have an external impetus for change. Typically, they need an outside force to nudge them toward a different approach. They adjust when they are strongly encouraged or required to do so, and they may initially resist. Seldom do they generate change on their own.

By the way, schools operate in a similar way. In a study of 700 schools [Turner, 2002] that compared test scores predicted using socioeconomic status with actual test results, schools that exceeded their predicted scores were found to have an internal impetus for change. And this extended beyond change related to curriculum and instruction. If they were dissatisfied with the flow of lunch lines, for example, or hallway traffic, or carpool pick-up and drop-off procedures, they tweaked the system until it ran smoothly. This contrasted markedly with schools that underperformed with regard to their predicted levels. Lagging schools made changes only when given external motivation, such as a new board policy, a change in state or federal mandates, or requirements imposed by the superintendent. This variation between high-achieving and low-achieving schools parallels the difference between superstars and backbones.
DETERMINE WHO MATTERS MOST

What about the mediocres? We often describe these replacement-level teachers as resistant to change or improvement. In my view, however, it’s more accurate to call them resistant to hard work. They prefer to go with the flow, even if it’s downhill. Indeed, if improvement required less effort than their current practices, some of them would be all over it. And as we’ll see when we come to Chapter 7, Harness the Power of Emotion, they tend to welcome change if it makes their own situation better.

SIX TYPES OF TEACHERS

I mentioned earlier that in the book *Six Types of Teachers* (2005), Fiore and Whitaker refine these three groups by developing subgroups. Understanding the subgroups may help us implement change more effectively.

The Superstars / Irreplaceables
- WOW (walks on water)—the role model
- Impacter—great in the classroom

Backbones / The Solids
- Stabilizer—solid at everything
- Dow Joneser—pluses and minuses

Mediocres / Replacement Level
- Harmless—no complaints, little benefit
- Negative Force—addition by subtraction

The superstar / irreplaceable teachers fall into two subgroups, typically distinguished by how outgoing they are outside the classroom. One group is called the WOWs (the ones who walk on water). Known for being outstanding in the classroom, these teachers are also natural leaders. They are usually very gregarious, and they have a broad influence among their peers. If they think something is a good idea, they tout it widely, typically pulling many others onto the bandwagon.

The teachers in the impacters subgroup are equally good in the classroom—but not nearly as many people are aware of it. Colleagues who have taught with them know and respect their work, as may a few others, but these teachers are less in the limelight than the WOWs. If they think something is a good idea, it almost always is, but they are less likely to use their influence to convince their peers. They are also less likely to want to be in the forefront of change.

Backbones / solids can also be divided into two subgroups. The stabilizers are strong and steady, although rarely spectacular. The energy thermostat in their classroom stays set at 68 degrees. Tuesday is like Friday, November is like April. They handle high-achieving students, average children, and struggling learners with pretty much the same aplomb.

Not many students would name these as favorite teachers, but almost no one would speak negatively of them. When it comes to change, they are willing to try almost anything without complaining about it. They do not seek to influence others, but if they look askance at an idea it will raise a cautionary flag for some of their peers.

Now, the Dow Jonesers (as legendary basketball announcer Dick Vitale called inconsistent players) are a different story—a story of ups and downs. Their enthusiasm for a task can raise their performance to star quality, but they may
well run out of steam. If you can surround them with dynamic people they’ll seem charged up, but in a humdrum situation their performance may be lack-luster. Their classroom energy thermostat swings from 80 degrees one day to a chilly 60 the next. They work well with students they like, not so well with others. When it comes to change, you want them on board, and they may jump on the bandwagon right away. However, you can’t rely on their consistent support.

Finally, mediocres / replacement level have two subgroups as well. The ones we call harmless earn that potentially misleading label because they stop short of being negative forces. Students learn very little in their classrooms, but they are not damaged in the process—no aha! moments, but no scar tissue. These teachers get through the day and the year without making waves. When it comes to change, they will neither lead nor block the way; they may simply get out of the way. They don’t throw a fit when the new textbooks arrive; they just clear a space for them on the shelf where the old ones stood. The harm they do by letting change flow past their classrooms may go unnoticed.

Negative force staff members not only resist change, they fight it. They may fight it vocally in a public forum, but they have also mastered the technique of griping and sniping behind the scenes. Their negativity leaves its traces in the classroom, the teachers’ workroom, and wherever else they go. The phrase “addition by subtraction” underscores the fact that if they leave the school, the situation improves. When it comes to change, we must recognize these individuals as potential roadblocks and figure out how to work with them in order to contain the damage, or work around them to reach our goals.

WHO MATTERS MOST?

Of these six groups of people, who matters most when it comes to implementing change? Surely we don’t want to let the negative forces hold sway. Nor can we afford to focus our time and energy on jump-starting the resistant mediocres. We can rely on the backbones, more so on the stabilizers than the Dow Jonesers.

The WOWs are natural leaders with substantial influence among their peers. They will be the vanguard of change. Let’s make sure we understand what makes them tick, and how to make the most of it. But the ones who matter most are the irreplaceable teachers. These superstars have the broadest vision of what the change will mean, and they have the internal motivation to move forward.

UNDERSTANDING THE IRREPLACEABLES / SUPERSTARS

One trait often attributed to superstars is that they are “born to teach.” I personally find this comment out of line, because it seems to imply that they were just handed a particular gift and all they have to do is let it roll. What if one of your superstars left the field of education to manage a McDonald’s franchise? That fast-food site might well become the best-run McDonald’s in the state. Would other franchise managers say the superstar was “born for the fast-food industry”?

In my view, superstars generally work as hard or even harder than anyone else in the organization. It’s not that they were born to teach; they have a higher level of talent and drive than most other people. Fortunately for us, they have chosen to apply it to teaching.
What else makes the superstars tick? Two factors come to mind: They thrive on autonomy, and they appreciate recognition.

Today’s educational landscape does not always lend itself to fostering a superstar teacher’s autonomy. Schools have become highly research driven, and for good reason, but it can be overdone. Some educational settings want research to support every change. That can cramp the style of a creative and innovative educator. If our superstars are on the cutting edge, breaking new ground, there is no research on their methods—because nobody has tried them before. If we see that happening in our schools, we need to take the shackles off and then start the research by observing the innovative teachers.

Among the constraints holding back the best teachers is standardized testing. The tests don’t reward creativity or measure the best that superstars can achieve in the classroom. Teachers are much less likely to teach three-digit addition if the test stops at two places. A follower will never cure cancer, but there is at least a chance that a risk-taker might. We must make sure that we do not hold a superstar back.

As mentioned, these irreplaceable staff members also appreciate recognition. They don’t necessarily crave public events with plaques or trophies or a teacher-of-the-year award. However, they do need acknowledgment that their performance goes above and beyond the standard work of others in their profession. It is important to strike the right balance so that superstars are not perceived as the “principal’s pet.”

This brings up a related point. In laying out the strategy in Chapter 3, Make Sure the First Exposure Is Great!, we mentioned the tactic of breaking up clusters of negativity at staff meetings by asking a few individuals who have a positive influence to sit next to some of the more vocal naysayers. Here it’s the reverse: You should take care not to diminish the power and influence of superstars by habitually sitting next to them at meetings, which might give the impression of favoritism. But you can and should include them in the vanguard as you move toward your goals.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO GUESS

Part of this process involves using the key players to screen your plans and proposals right from the start. If the superstars do not think something is a good idea, what are the odds that it is going to fly with the rest of the faculty? Even more important: what are the chances that it actually is a good idea? The superstars are not focusing on how the proposed change will affect them or their classrooms; they are looking at it from the vantage point of the whole school. Their breadth of vision is valuable.

The best part is that you don’t have to guess what they think. You can just ask them, because these irreplaceable teachers have another gift: the ability to look you in the eye and tell you the truth. You can trust them not to spread the word that you asked them. Superstars don’t feed the rumor mill; that’s another trait that earns them the respect of their peers.

PEOPLE, NOT PROGRAMS, MAKE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE

The more you understand the people in your organization, the more effectively you can move your school toward its goals. Knowing where to start and identifying the individuals to start with are critical parts of successfully implementing change.
DROPOUT RATE

Here is an example that may help us understand the value of a superstar. Let’s pretend that your school or district has an issue with students dropping out of school prior to completion. Of course this would be a concern for any school in this situation. Now I want you to think of your best staff member—a true superstar.

Let’s put them in a room by themselves for 20 minutes with no technology and ask them to come up with ideas to reduce the dropout rates in your school/district. What is amazing is that it does not matter whether they teach first grade, freshmen, or advanced physics. Just have them brainstorm ideas by themselves with no technology for 20 minutes.

How many do they come up with? Would you agree with at least a dozen? Maybe more, but let’s say a dozen. How many of them are good ideas? Pretty close to all 12? Okay, how many of these good ideas involve extra work on their part? —all of them. In other words, they can create solutions from nothing and will generate them even if it results in additional work for them.

Now let’s contrast that with others. Choose a group from the backbones and mediocre categories. Rather than limiting it to one person, feel free to select as many as you like. Put them in a room alone or with other backbones and mediocres. Ask them to come up with ideas to reduce the dropout rate in your school and/or district. They can have technology or not—either way is fine. How many ideas would this group have? Maybe half a dozen? How many of these ideas are good? Maybe half the half a dozen? Now, how many involve extra work on their part, with no stipend?

Obviously some backbones are good at idea generation. Additionally, some of them are willing to do extra work to help students and their school. Putting the two together is a special gift. But finding someone who can do all of these things and identify possible solutions out of thin air is a special gift. As we work to implement and initiate change we must continually be cognizant of the role that superstars can and must play in this growth.

PUTTING THE STRATEGY INTO ACTION

Pages 154–155 of Leading School Change, 2nd Edition provide action steps to enable us to more clearly recognize who matters most when beginning change implementation. By completing this activity we are more capable of applying this understanding to our own setting.
One of the biggest challenges principals face is supporting teachers and other staff members when they come under criticism of parents. Truly, this can be a make-or-break issue for the credibility of the building leader in the eyes of the faculty. If this is done correctly, it can give you a wide swath of influence when dealing with other issues or asking teachers to take on essential additional leadership roles in the school. If this is handled incorrectly, it can very quickly shatter the trust level and influence a principal has with the professionals who are in the school.

Supporting teachers when they are under fire from parents is similar to how we must support teachers in the area of student discipline. If we are seen as weak, non-supportive, or even afraid, it can send shivers of impact down the hallways and into the teachers’ lounge. Let’s compare it to support regarding student discipline. Principals will get a new job and then share with me that the teachers wanted someone older, or someone of a different gender, or someone local, or someone with more experience, etc. I always reassure them by saying, “All of that matters until the first student is sent to the office.” When a teacher sends a student to the office for discipline and the teacher feels supported, it does not matter at all what the background of the administrator is. When a teacher sends a student to the office for discipline and the teacher does not feel supported, it does not matter what the administrator’s background is. This exact same comparison applies to feeling administrative support when dealing with parent issues.

**FEEL SUPPORTED**

You may have noticed the term “feel supported” in that section. Please note that it does not just say the teacher is supported. This does not mean that the staff members will not be supported. That is a given. But a key component of this, which is too often overlooked, is that teachers also want to “feel” supported. Let’s look at an example involving student discipline.

If a student is sent to the office for a minor infraction and is assigned two hours of after-school detention, this is an example of a leader supporting the teacher. However, if we do not communicate to the teacher what we did as a consequence, and possibly explain how that decision was made, the teacher may not feel supported because he or she might not even know what occurred. Instead, after assigning two hours of detention, the administrator could personally go to the teacher, explain the consequence, share what was said to the parent when they called, and tell the teacher “Let me know how he behaves when he returns to class tomorrow. We will not tolerate this type of behavior in our school and in your classroom.” Then the teacher is much more likely to “feel” supported then in the previous non-communicative two-hour detention assignment. Never underestimate the power of this emotional reassurance. It is a critical component and should be kept in mind when supporting teachers in any way, but especially when supporting them with students and parents.

**THE GIFT OF CONFIDENCE**

One of the most powerful gifts a leader can give others is the gift of confidence. Support is one way that this can be given. Another essential way to help others have confidence is by demonstrating that you have it yourself. When a teacher tells you
SUPPORTING YOUR STAFF

Excerpted from A School Leader’s Guide to Dealing with Difficult Parents

that Mrs. Fireball, a volatile parent, is on her way to school, how do you react? If you tense up, so that it can be easily noticed by the teacher, potentially you have taken away the teacher’s confidence. You have validated that teacher’s fear of Mrs. Fireball. At the other end of the spectrum, if you smile and say professionally, “It’s always a treat to see Mrs. Fireball,” you may help the teacher relax simply because you had a relaxed response. Being aware of how you come across and how you deal with stressful situations will have a ripple effect—either way—on your school. Keep in mind that when it comes to leadership of a school, calm is good. Let’s take a look at something that you can do regularly that will instill confidence in those we lead. It is also something that can be taught to those who are in our school.

LINE IN THE SAND

When we interact with people who like to intimidate, especially if they do so with anger, we should remember that they want one of two things. They would like us to respond with fear or react with anger. Either one works well for them. Picture two people face to face. One is emotionally launching toward the other. The aggressor is ready for the other person to either wither back or launch right back. Neither of these responses is appropriate, and more importantly, neither of these responses is effective. The people who act so aggressively are drawing a figurative line in the sand. They are hoping we back away so they get a bigger swath of territory, or they are hoping we cross that line so they have permission to respond with “no holds barred” on their part. Rather than choosing either of these approaches, let’s choose something that will keep them off guard. It is something we call the “sidle up.”

What this means is anytime we approach a potentially volatile person, rather than interacting with them face to face—i.e., line in the sand—we should approach them from the side, just like they are an old friend. When an angry or intimidating parent stomps into your office, do not sit on the other side of the desk. To them this is a line in the sand. Instead, move around to the other side of the desk and sit right next to them like they were the nicest parent in the school.

Your first thought might be, “I would feel terribly uncomfortable doing this!” Of course you would. It is never fun interacting with a bossy and unreasonable person. However, keep in mind that if you stay across a desk or table from them, you will still feel uncomfortable. You know why? Because they are still bossy and unreasonable. But the benefit of moving is very simple. When you sit next to them, they also feel some of this discomfort. So rather than you sitting across from them helping them to form their desired line in the sand, sit next to them and then both of you can feel awkward instead of it just being you. This may sound strange, but try it and you will find out how powerful it is. It is very disarming for the most challenging parents and others whom we interact with.

This same principle applies if you are supervising a basketball game, play, or concert. If there is a challenging parent misbehaving in the stands, be very friendly and go sit right next to them. Not only will this likely knock them off their game, it will help everyone whom they are making uncomfortable because you are not acting afraid, so that means they do not need to be afraid either. While there, if they continue to be disruptive or disrespectful, you can nicely and professionally say, “I hate to tell you this, but if you stand up again I will have to have you escorted out of the gym. I am so sorry, but if you stand up again I will have to have you leave.” They are the only person
who needs to hear this. There is no need for an announcement. By doing this, you have clearly laid out an expectation for the only person who needs it. Now, if they do it again, both of you know what the consequences are.

By approaching difficult people in this manner and eliminating the line in the sand, you take some of the steam out of these agitators. At the same time, you are giving confidence to your staff because you’re demonstrating how they can be professional and calm around volatile people whom they might fear.

**CHAPTER 3 RECAP**

- Make sure teachers “feel” supported by you when they’re dealing with difficult students and parents.
- Help teachers become more confident in their dealings with challenging parents. Do this by modeling how you are confident with parents yourself.
- Eliminate the line in the sand with volatile parents.
4. LOOKING FOR THE GOOD PART—SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO SQUINT

It may seem futile to offer a section on motivating the most difficult staff members, because you have probably attempted to do this so many times with frustrating results. However, it may be important to revisit motivation in terms of working with these staff members. It is also valuable to keep in mind that opportunities to reinforce or motivate resistant staffers may occur very infrequently. We must become aware of and act upon these chances when they present themselves.

As a principal you should consistently try motivating your most difficult staff members. You should give them every opportunity to improve their behavior. By knowing that you have given them your very best attempt at improvement through motivation, you can feel much more comfortable when you have to approach them in a less positive fashion. Adult decide each day what their frames of mind will be. Teachers make decisions on how they are going to treat each student they work with. You hope that each of your faculty take advantage of the opportunities you provide them.

Leaders look for the opportunity to “catch” someone doing something right. This is a much greater challenge with difficult teachers, because they often do so many things wrong. However, if there is any skill or ability that a difficult staff member does have, make every attempt to take advantage of that. It may not even be directly related to their teaching.

One thing to be aware of is that many teachers have little or no awareness of the effectiveness of their peers’ teaching abilities. They feel that if someone is nice to them at lunch they are probably a good teacher. If they have worked with someone who has sent them sympathy cards or shown them personal concern in times of need, they assume these people are likely to be effective with students. The real issue with this is twofold. First, if you attempt to work with less effective teachers to improve their skills, this may cause a ripple effect with other staff. This is most likely to occur if the other teachers are under the assumption that these ineffective staff members are quality classroom teachers because they are nice interpersonally. The other issue is that these informal relations can cause other staff members to follow their negative lead in resisting change or having a negative influence on the school. Attempting to alter difficult teachers who are held in some regard by their peers is a special challenge and motivation is generally a safe place to start.

Here is an example of a way that motivation may assist in increasing the effectiveness of a difficult teacher who had some informal credibility with other staff members. This particular teacher would readily be described as difficult. This person felt little self-worth and thus had little regard for her students or profession. This challenging staff member did have an uncanny talent for making crafts. If you gave her a soda can, a paper clip, and a piece of yarn she could make the cutest Easter bunny you had ever seen. Her teaching responsibilities had no direct tie into this area and at first I saw it as an annoyance because she focused so much time and energy into her crafts and little or none into teaching. Additionally, because she would make things and give them as gifts or sell them, she had much more credibility with her peers than she otherwise would have. In a way she would buy people’s sympathy, or at least rent it, with her non-teaching talent.

Finally, after deciding to effect change in this teacher because of her offensive nature to students, I decided to try to use her one positive talent to cultivate in her a higher
energy level. I asked her to make crafts for each of the faculty meetings to use as centerpieces at the tables. We would then use these as door/attendance prizes. Thus, I was able to reinforce her positively for these efforts. Gradually her confidence as a person and professional increased, and over time, she moved from a mediocre to a backbone staff member. Searching for one or two positive traits may help raise a person’s feeling of self-worth and allow this to carry over in a positive way to professional performance.

**FRIDAY FOCUS—DEVELOPING A STAFF MEMO THAT WORKS**

In order to motivate any and all faculty and staff effectively, you must have appropriate tools to work with. In the aforementioned study regarding more effective and less effective elementary principals (Whitaker, M. E., 1997), one of the differences between these groups was that the more effective principals have regular, positive, weekly memos for their faculty and staff. None of the less effective principals produced positive faculty memos on a regular basis.

Knowing the impact that principals have on schools, it is crucial that principals firmly establish individual beliefs and work to effect an appropriate belief system throughout the school. One of the most important and easiest ways to do this is to have a weekly memo. Whitaker and Lumpa (1995) believe the principal should write this weekly and that it should have several purposes:

1. It should communicate logistical information about upcoming activities and provide a calendar of events. This helps organize the school, but it also allows staff meeting time to be much more positive and productive.

2. The weekly memo should also be used as a staff development tool by consistently keeping the beliefs of the principal in front of the staff. Attaching articles, paragraphs about personal beliefs, etc., are important ways to accomplish this goal. Stronge (1990) felt that one essential role of a principal is to communicate the goals of the school with the faculty and this method of correspondence will enable this to occur on a regular basis. This can help promote growth and direction for all staff including the most difficult staff members.

3. The memo should also be used as a motivational tool. It should be used to mention good things about the school. Examples include everything from, “When I was in Mrs. Johnson’s room I was so impressed with . . .” to “I asked four students in the cafeteria on Wednesday what they liked best about school and they said, ‘The way the teachers treat us!’”

4. The *Friday Focus* can assist with planning. It can help staff members be more prepared for upcoming events because of the information that is regularly provided in the weekly calendar. It can also benefit the planning of the building principal. By regularly including future events, the principal has an early opportunity to organize the logistics of these occurrences. The entire school has the benefit of being more informed and organized.

This weekly memo can be handled in a variety of ways. One effective method is to have one in all teachers’ mailboxes when they arrive at work on Friday morning. This way they get a good pick me up on what is typically a difficult work day. The *Friday Focus* enables your faculty meetings to be much more staff development
oriented because the routines have been taken care of on paper. If a principal gets in a routine of having these informative, uplifting, and belief focusing memos, the teachers will look forward to it each Friday morning and it will play a critical role in the communication and establishment of the schoolwide belief system for the faculty. These memos can also be routinely sent to central office personnel and to other schools to broaden their impact and to help enhance an awareness of the school’s beliefs on a district-wide basis.

It is essential to have as many avenues as possible in order to be able to motivate any staff, but particularly the more resistant members. This concept is critical and this tool will be referred to regularly in upcoming sections of the book. Setting a positive tone for the school is a very important way to help put pressure on negative and resistant staff members.

GIVE DIFFICULT TEACHERS RESPONSIBILITY

One of the toughest things to do as a principal is to go against our natural instincts, but using this motivational tool requires doing just that. Responsibility is often a powerful motivator for people. This is often true even for the most challenging staff members.

Connie Podesta (1994) feels that it is important that principals realize a couple of things about difficult teachers. One is that the difficult teachers know exactly what they are doing. They work at being difficult. Their behaviors have been reinforced for years. Additionally, it is crucial to note that difficult teachers are rewarded for being difficult. We want to avoid hassles, so we give these teachers easier students, we do not ask them to assume responsibilities, and we give them few extra duties. As a result, they have no incentive to change. Thus, you must demand that they carry a fair share of the load.

The principal’s instinct, however, is not to give them responsibilities. There are a couple of reasons why. One is that you assume difficult teachers do not want any responsibility. They seldom meet their expected responsibilities, so why think they would want to do anything additional? But the other more predominant reason principals do not ask them to do any extra tasks is this: they assume they will not do it correctly. After all, they seem to perform so inadequately, there seems little reason to expect they will appropriately attend to any new responsibility. This is a natural feeling for any principal. For that matter, every productive member of the staff probably shares the same perspective. Yet, giving them a responsibility may be an appropriate way to initiate change in their approach to work.

Realize this responsibility does not have to be the most essential work of the school. Too often we continually rely on our best staff members—often our superstars—to do much of the extra work. There is a good reason for this approach. They will do it right, it will be done on time, and it will be done effectively. However, we need to be very protective of our best faculty members.

One challenge that all principals face is determining when and what to delegate. A quick rule of thumb for this is very simple. A principal should delegate anything that anyone else can do because there are so many things that only the principal can do. This is an easy test to determine whether something should be delegated.

This same test should be applied when we are considering asking our superstars to take on another task. They should only be taking on additional responsibilities that
no one else can accomplish. This is again true because there are so many things that only your superstars can attain. Thus if you are considering whom to ask to do something extra, you need to decide whether it is essential that your best staff members accomplish it. If it is not, this is an example of something you can share with others.

Giving a difficult teacher responsibility may be particularly effective if it involves peers. Peer involvement can be at a couple of different levels. One example is asking a difficult teacher to coordinate some faculty social responsibilities. If they are aware that their peers know they coordinated this year’s Christmas party, or that the other teachers are relying on them to provide the snacks for this month’s staff meeting, it may put some additional pressure on them to meet these expectations. The purpose of this is not to embarrass this difficult staff member—quite the opposite. The goal is to have the teacher do something so you can offer thanks and recognition for efforts when the goal is accomplished. Building a feeling of self-value is an essential part of making a difficult teacher feel like a contributing member of the school. This can help move a mediocre teacher to a backbone or raise the energy level of a challenging staff member to a higher point. The recognition can be a private thank-you or note. It could be a public acknowledgment at a staff meeting or in the Friday Focus. This can be a powerful tool to help motivate very reluctant individuals.

A second way to use peers to help motivate your most difficult teachers is a little more complex. It involves linking the challenging teachers with one or more of your most positive staff. Linking a difficult teacher with one or two superstars does two things: It puts pressure on the less effective teacher to perform with this respected person or persons. And it allows the negative faculty member to be a part of something that is very likely to be successful. Most things that a superstar is a part of work out well.

There is an important caveat, however. This process should always begin by asking your superstars if they are willing to participate. You should also explain to them what your purpose is in doing this. Remember, your strongest, most positive staff members are your most important people. Do not sacrifice one of them in order to affect a difficult teacher. Always place the personal regard of your positive, productive staff members first.

Here is an example of giving difficult teachers responsibility by linking them with two superstar teachers. Identify an area of professional development for your staff. A possibility might be cooperative learning. You could locate a workshop for three of your teachers to attend, and have them return prepared to lead some staff development for the entire group. When deciding which teachers would be most interested and most effective in presenting to the remainder of the faculty your first thoughts often involve three very effective teachers. Instead of tapping three effective teachers, identify your most exemplary staff member and ask about any interest in this area. If the response is positive, explain that you would like him or her to be a part of a group of three teachers to attend the workshop and share with other staff members at a future faculty meeting. Then confide that you would like teacher X (a difficult teacher) to be one of the three and explain why.

Explaining why may seem risky. Obviously deciding whether to do so depends on your relationship with the superstar. However, it can be done because a teacher with the high level of respect necessary to be a superstar can probably hold a confidence.
Also, if you are pairing a productive teacher with a less effective staff member, it is important that the superstar does not see this as an unfair burden. Explaining your rationale can be validating to this productive teacher. However, if you are uncertain of that trust level, then it may be best to not share your perspective.

Then ask the superstar teacher whom he or she would most like to be the third member of the staff to attend since teacher X is also going to go. This way the superstar is not alone and not uncomfortable. Additionally, teacher X will spend time with two positive teachers and none with often more negative associates. This is an added benefit of structuring this opportunity in this fashion.

Teacher X could then be approached in a couple of different manners. The approach is important; otherwise, the initial reaction may be to say “no.” You could share information about the workshop and say you would like teacher X to be a part of the group with the other two members. If the others are respected superstars, this invitation might be viewed positively by teacher X.

You could ask the superstar to approach teacher X, if this would be more effective. Or you could tell teacher X that you and the superstar teacher were visiting about the workshop and considering people who might go and teacher X’s name came up. You do not have to expand on this, saying the name was your suggestion.

When the teachers return and lead an inservice for their peers, it may be a wonderful time to praise all three teachers both publicly and privately. You can also repeatedly approach the two positive staff members in private and acknowledge their willingness to attempt to motivate their more reluctant peer.

This motivational process can be especially effective with a negative teacher who is a follower. Staff members who tend to associate with negative leaders and give them an audience, often just want to fit in somewhere. This opportunity may give them the chance to associate with a more positive peer group. Realize that they are weak by nature and will tend to emulate stronger personalities around them.

PRAISE IN FRONT OF A SUPERIOR

The best way to give positive reinforcement to your own son and daughter is to brag about them to another adult. If they overhear this conversation, it is very validating. A similar approach may be just as effective with adults. Praising staff members in front of your superior is a very powerful method to reinforce and motivate faculty. This approach is also valid in working with your difficult staff.

If the superintendent is in your school, take him or her by a difficult teacher’s classroom and praise the teacher in front of the superintendent. Say to the superintendent in front of the teacher, “Dr. Smith, I was in Ms. Jones’s classroom on Tuesday and she had such an interesting science experiment going on—the kids were so engaged in it—she was doing a terrific job.” This, once again, is an example of Steven Covey’s (1989) “circle of influence.” In the same manner that praising your son or daughter in front of another adult is a powerful reinforcement, praising a teacher in front of one of your superiors can be very valuable to the teacher. The other benefit of praising a mediocre teacher to one of your superiors is that before or after it occurs you can explain to the superintendent why you did it. You can privately acknowledge to the superintendent that although this teacher is often very challenging, you still wanted to recognize your staffer for a positive activity you had observed in their classroom. It may be beneficial to try this method of motivation...
at least once. If the results are positive, then it is a method that you can implement regularly.

The superior need not be the superintendent. It can be anyone you feel the difficult teacher is most likely to respect. It may be another principal or some other person in or out of the school. Depending on the circumstances, it may be important that it be someone that you have a trusting relationship with so that you can explain what you are hoping to accomplish. Otherwise, the outside person might develop a diminished regard for your professional judgment of staff quality.

5. PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE PRAISING

Several examples included in the previous chapter involve praising a difficult staff member. Some of the examples entail public praising and others were more private. Praise in the Friday Focus is an example of public commendation. When praising difficult teachers, it is important to keep in mind the thoughts and feelings of your positive staff. Be very sensitive to how they will feel when you praise the difficult teachers publicly. They could easily become resentful—and rightfully so.

I feel that a safe rule of thumb is that you have one chance to praise a difficult teacher publicly. If you begin to see change or improvement as a result, then you can continue to offer public or private praise at any appropriate opportunity. However, if you observe no change, I feel that you should never offer praise publicly again. The reason for this is very simple. The positive people are most important to your school. They will very likely view the public recognition of this difficult teacher negatively. They may feel that their positive efforts are going unrecognized. If there is no change on the part of the teacher, then you cannot continue to offer praise publicly and thereby risk losing credibility with the remainder of the faculty.

This being said, however, the opportunity to give private praise with difficult teachers will continue. This praise can be in whatever form you feel will be most effective. It can also be in a variety of forms and fashions. It is important to understand what praise is. Ben Bissell (1992) has described five things that help praise work. Effective praise is authentic, specific, immediate, clean, and private. Let us apply these general characteristics to the specifics of motivating and praising teachers.

Authentic means that we are genuinely praising people—recognizing them for something that is true. This is an important facet because recognizing something authentic can never grow weary. Sometimes people state that they do not praise more because they feel that it will lose its credibility or that it will become less believable if it happens too much. The way to prevent this is to make sure that it is always authentic. No one ever feels that they are praised too much for something genuine.

Effective praise must be specific. The behavior you acknowledge often becomes the behavior that will be continued. If you can praise difficult teachers’ more positive efforts with specific recognition, then you can help them see specific areas of value. For example, acknowledging that teachers effectively used questioning skills during a class that you informally observed can help reinforce that specific area that they do correctly. Sometimes the regard difficult teachers have for themselves is so low that they often feel they can do nothing effectively. Specific praise also allows you to reinforce someone in an authentic manner. You do not have to be dishonest and
say they are outstanding teachers, or that lessons were excellent, if they were not. Instead you can identify those areas that did have merit and acknowledge them through praise.

Recognize positive efforts and contributions in a timely manner—with immediacy. Providing authentic and specific feedback soon after it occurs is an important element in making reinforcement effective. One thing that allowed me to give efficient feedback when performing informal “drop-in” supervision (Glatthorn) with several classes in a row, was to take a memo pad with me. If I observed in eight classes for two to five minutes each, I would remain in the last class and write specific words of praise for each of the eight teachers, assuming that there was something authentic I could reinforce. When I returned to the office, I would give the notes to the secretary and ask that the notes be put in the teachers’ mailbox. Other principals carry Post-it notes with them and put them on the door when they leave individual classes. You could also place them on the teacher’s desk, grade book, or lesson plan book for even more immediate feedback. I would work very hard to find something positive as often as possible in teachers’ classrooms. It could be related to the topic, what students were saying or doing, the physical environment, or even a new tie a teacher wore. Positive reinforcement is a valuable change tool.

The fourth guideline for praise is that it be clean. Clean praise is just that—praise offered honestly without qualifiers or caveats or provisions. This is often a very challenging requirement for praise, especially for educators. Clean means a couple of different things. Praise that is not clean is issued in order to get the teacher to do something in the future. In other words, it is important to compliment teachers because it is authentic, not just because you are hoping that they will do something different tomorrow. Remind yourself of this quite regularly. If you do not, you will be tempted to discontinue praising, because you will feel it “does not work.” An example of this would be if you praise difficult staff members for the “wait time” they were using in class during the morning and then later in the day they are their usual rude selves to you. Do not feel that these two events are linked. Often we take the surly manner of difficult teachers and others very personally. Though our goal is to get them to discontinue this approach, we need to be aware that more often their mood has much more to do with them and the way they feel about themselves than it does with you and how they are regarding you.

Clean praise cannot include the word “but.” For example, if you are trying to compliment someone and say, “I appreciated the tone of voice you were using with Steven today, but, have you changed your bulletin boards lately?” The individual you hoped you were praising will very likely only remember the part after the “but,” which was a criticism and very unlikely to recall the attempted compliment at the start of the sentence. If you really mean to praise someone, then it is important to divide these two events. If you stopped with, “I appreciated the tone of voice you were using with Steven today,” then this could have been an authentic, specific, immediate, positive, and clean reinforcing event for this teacher. This helps establish two things for this difficult teacher. It helps clarify the expectations you have for the manner in which the teacher works with students. It also develops a baseline for both of you that the teacher is able to treat students appropriately. It will be much easier to revisit this positive event later, if needed.

The other part of the comment, “Have you changed your bulletin boards lately?” has no need for immediacy Tying these two together reduces or even eliminates
the value of the praise. With difficult people, opportunities to praise are rarer than opportunities to be critical. Another issue to remember is this: Most difficult people will probably make similar errors chronically. If you pass up the opportunity to comment today, feel confident that their bulletin board will still need some updating tomorrow.

Dr. Bissell believes that most praise should be private. I agree with this and would also say that if in doubt, you are always safe to praise someone in private. As previously mentioned, difficult people offer few deeds that should receive public praise, if they do not change. You must protect the feelings of your productive backbones and superstars. However, if all praise is given in private, then you might miss many teachable moments. This is true when it involves difficult teachers and it can also apply when you attempt to alter the behavior of the majority of staff members.

Recall the example regarding having three superstars attend a meeting at a school whose appearance I was hoping our classrooms could emulate. We went to the meeting and started peeking into classrooms and then the superstars altered their own room appearances over the weekend. Having three teachers improve the appearance of their classrooms is a benefit to your school and particularly to those three classes. But, as mentioned earlier, those three superstars’ classes probably needed the least upgrading in appearance of any classrooms in the school. However, the remainder of the faculty became involved because of the public recognition given them in the Friday Focus. This allowed their impact to go well beyond their three classrooms. And, eventually, these changes even positively impacted some of my mediocre teachers. Without public praising, the impact would have been much more limited.

Public praising can also be used on rare occasions with difficult staff. Several examples will be given in future chapters, but the one cited previously regarding giving them responsibility is an application of this concept. If difficult staff members are aware that coworkers know that they are responsible for a task, then there is already some public recognition of this. If they come through, the praise being public is often very appropriate and effective in changing future behaviors.

The example of the teacher making crafts for the faculty meeting is a second one involving the public praising of a difficult staff member. Without the public recognition of efforts, I am confident that the positive results would have been greatly diminished.

Before leaving this concept of public praising, however, keep in mind that superstars want autonomy and recognition. This recognition does not necessarily mean only public acknowledgments, but it is important to not lose sight of this when considering the public praising of the difficult or mediocre staff. Be mindful that one of the most important aspects of being a superstar is being respected by others—including your peers. So also be aware of the amount of public recognition you give your superstars, especially if positive reinforcement is somewhat new to your school climate and culture. If the other staff become resentful of public praise for the superstars they are likely to respect them less. Then they are no longer superstars and this is a dramatic limitation on their future abilities to help be a positive influence for the school.

An easy test of whether it is acceptable to praise in public is whether it is something anyone could have done. In the next section there is an example of publicly
recognizing a teacher who chose to write a grant that would benefit the school. Any staff member could have chosen to pursue a grant and thus could have received this recognition. This was proven true in the future when many others joined the previous efforts in pursuing other grants. These grant-writing efforts even included a couple of former mediocres and challenging staff! Thus, there became many other appropriate opportunities for positive reinforcement in an authentic, specific, immediate, clean, and public manner.
This Study Guide is designed to help your new teachers put the ideas from *Your First Year* into practice in their own classroom. You can print this guide and share with your teachers; they can work on it independently, with a mentor or colleague, or with a group. Thank you to you and your teachers for choosing to make a difference, and good luck!

**SECTION I:**
**BEFORE THE STUDENTS ARRIVE: STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE**

**CHAPTER 1: SETTING UP AND ORGANIZING YOUR CLASSROOM (PP. 3-6)**

1. What grade level will you be teaching, and how many students will be in your class? Sketch out a potential classroom arrangement that would allow you to be successful. For example, would you want desks to be clustered in groups or in a circle? Would you want to have a pillow area?

2. Make a list of the supplies your students will need to have every day to be successful in your class. Then write an S next to items that will be provided by the school, and an H next to items they will be expected to bring in from home. How will you be prepared when students show up with missing items?
   
   a. 
   
   e. 
   
   i. 
   
   b. 
   
   f. 
   
   j. 
   
   c. 
   
   g. 
   
   k. 
   
   d. 
   
   h. 
   
   l. 

**CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING YOUR PROCEDURES (PP. 7-10)**

3. Using the guidelines on pages 8 and 9, draft your classroom procedures on separate paper. Your procedures should cover everything from using supplies, to turning in homework, to using the bathroom, etc. Remember that you can change these in-flight if needed, but it’s important to have them planned before day 1.

   If you get stuck, see which ones might already be listed in your school handbook, or ask a mentor or colleague for advice. You could also try asking the Twitterverse with hashtag #NTChat (new teacher chat). For example, you could ask for suggestions on bathroom policies for middle schoolers.
4. Now go back to the procedures you drafted and run them by your mentor or a trusted colleague. Make revisions if needed.

CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPING YOUR RULES (PP. 11-15)

5. Draft some rules for your classroom on separate paper.

6. Now filter your rules using these reflection questions from page 14 of the book:
Do you feel comfortable consistently enforcing the rules you have chosen? Do you need to make varied rules for different classes that you teach? Did you choose rules that you think your students will also be able to take ownership of?

CHAPTER 4: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: PREPARE YOUR MINDSET (PP. 16-24)

7. Look at the list on page 18 for building relationships with students. Which three of those sound like ones you’ll definitely want to or be able to try? Can you think of any others?
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   Others:

8. Reflect on the house metaphor from this chapter. Why are relationships the foundation of the house? Why are high and specific expectations necessary to build the house? And finally, how can lack of consistency harm the house’s structure?
CHAPTER 5: WHEN STUDENTS FOLLOW THE RULES... OR DON’T (PP. 25-32)

9. Brainstorm a consequences system that might work for you. (Refer to the examples on pages 30-31 for help—tally system, recording points on a tablet, etc.)

CHAPTER 6: LESSON PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION (PP. 33-43)

10. Does your school have a required lesson plan format? If not, think of the format that will work for you (perhaps one you were given in grad school or one you found online and modified). How can you make sure you have enough planned in a lesson to avoid downtime?

11. How can you make lessons so engaging that they naturally prevent misbehavior? Brainstorm some of your favorite methods for making learning more active for students.

SECTION II: THE STUDENTS ARE HERE... NOW WHAT?

CHAPTER 7: EXPLAINING AND PRACTICING PROCEDURES (PP. 47-52)

12. What steps do the authors give for implementing structures in your classroom? Why are practice and modeling so important?
CHAPTER 8: MANAGING YOUR CLASSROOM (PP. 53-69)

13. Reflect on the teachers you had growing up. Did any of them tell you about their bad moods and act like the students themselves? How can managing yourself and staying upbeat improve the dynamic of your classroom?

14. Think about the subtle steering and proximity techniques offered in this chapter. How are they more effective than calling out the misbehavior? Try it the next time a student misbehaves in your class, and write your thoughts on how it went here:

15. Hopefully you won’t encounter “what if” situations, but if you do, make sure you know your school’s protocol. For example, what is your school’s policy on gun violence? Write it here. It’s always important to know the protocols, but we hope you won’t ever need to implement them.

16. The next section is on repairing and rebuilding. Why is it important to repair when in doubt? Reflect below.
SECTION III:
WORKING WITH ADULTS

CHAPTER 9: WORKING WITH ADMINISTRATORS (PP. 73-76)

17. Is your principal proactive about meeting with teachers? If not, how can you proactively take the opportunity to interact with him or her? Brainstorm some ideas here:

CHAPTER 10: WORKING WITH PEERS (PP. 77-79)

18. Do you have a positive mentor with whom you like working? If not, what positive colleagues can you seek out for help?

CHAPTER 11: THE EMPOWERERS (PP. 80-84)

19. Find an empowerer in your school or even in the Twitterverse and reach out to him or her. Write how it goes here. How can you continue a relationship with this person to motivate you and help you improve?

CHAPTER 12: DON’T BE AFRAID TO REPAIR: STUDENTS, CO-WORKERS, PRINCIPAL (PP. 85-88)

20. Some people worry that apologizing to students will make them seem weak or give students the upper hand, but why do the authors say it is so important to apologize and not be afraid to repair?
CHAPTER 13: PARENTS: FRIEND NOT FOE (PP. 89-94)

21. List one way you can build relationships with parents early in the year, besides back to school night. Then give it a try!

22. How can you fit positive phone calls into your busy week? Try one and reflect on how it goes here:

SECTION IV:
CONTINUING TO REFLECT, REFINE, AND GROW ON YOUR JOURNEY

CHAPTER 14: MIDFLIGHT CORRECTIONS (PP. 97-105)

23. As the authors say, good teachers reflect each day on how their lessons went—on where we stood, the tone of our voice, whether our instructions and explanations were clear, etc. Why is this so important? What method will you use for reflecting this year (quiet time, journaling, blogging, etc.)?

24. What is the difference between tweaking and resetting?

25. How will you know if it’s time to hit the reset button?
CHAPTER 15: BE A SPONGE (PP. 106-110)

26. How often will you be observed this year? What other opportunities will you be given to improve your practice this year? What other opportunities can you find yourself?

CHAPTER 16: IT ALWAYS STARTS WITH YOU (PP. 111-113)

27. Is there anything bothering you about your teaching situation this year that doesn’t seem to be in your control? What can you do about it anyway?

CHAPTER 17: WHAT’S NEXT? (PP. 114-116)

28. As you move forward on your journey, you’ll have good days and bad. Remind yourself why you chose to become a teacher and write it here. Refer back to it when you need motivation to get through a tough day.

Remember, you have chosen the most special profession. Thank you for choosing to matter and choosing to make a difference!