

LEADING WITH FOCUS

**Elevating the Essentials
for School and District
Improvement**

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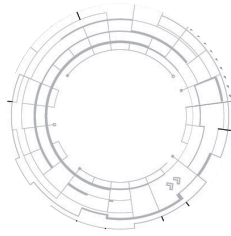


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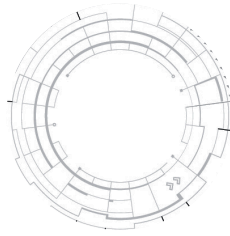
This book could not have been written without the help of the successful leaders whose work is at the core of what I advocate in this book. For years, I have wanted to capture the simple essence of what I learned from these leaders through observations and interviews. Their accomplishments and example convinced me that to be effective, school leadership needed to be drastically simplified—and its focus intensified.

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Introduction



The first law of simplicity: Reduce.

—John Maeda



A rich, rounded education has profound, life-altering effects on every stratum of society, from the poor to the privileged. It enlarges the intellect, nourishes creativity, and makes us better citizens (Edmundson, 2004; Hirsch, 2009). A recent Brookings Institution study points to new evidence that affirms the decisive effects of a quality education on individual incomes, lifetime earnings, social mobility, health, and life expectancy. It increases the odds that children will be raised in stable, two-parent families and appreciably decreases the proportion

of children raised in poverty. Importantly, the study also confirms that a good education depends, even more than previously thought, on the *effectiveness of the teaching* students receive (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013).

But alas, most teaching is *not* effective. In the great majority of schools, there are wide, crippling disparities in both what we teach and how well we teach, both within and among schools. In most schools, a dismaying amount of time is spent on nonacademic tasks, with students rarely found reading or writing—arguably the two most educational activities they can engage in. Every credible study (as we'll see in Chapter 2 of this book) confirms these findings.

There is a great, perhaps unprecedented opportunity here for school leaders: multiple studies affirm the fact that improvements in curriculum and instruction depend, more than anything, on effective school and district leadership (Leithwood et al. in NASSP/NAESP, 2013). If we wanted to, we could ensure that the great majority of our schools *consistently* provide quality curriculum and effective instruction—and reap the immense benefits of doing so. But for this to happen, we must first radically recast the work of school leaders.

It is vital that we *simplify and demystify* school leadership. In 30 years of visiting schools and classrooms, I've become convinced that the primary obstacle to effective leadership is our failure to identify, clarify, and then focus on certain actions that ensure optimal instruction. School leadership has become an unduly profuse, complicated, and *unfocused* business. Administrative training and certification programs have contributed to this complexity: they abound in theories,

principles, and approaches, but rarely clarify and equip leaders to execute the most obvious principles and routines that lead to better educational outcomes (Elmore, Evans, & Marshall in Schmoker, 2006). If we want to bring effective instructional leadership within the reach of all school leaders, we must give leaders permission to focus their limited time and energy on the core of good schooling: a widely acknowledged, empirically established set of fairly obvious practices that have the most direct effect on the quality of education.

This book is based on the principles and practices I wrote of in my 2011 book *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*, with a more explicit focus on actions that leadership can take. Though *Leading with Focus* can be read as a companion to *Focus* or on its own, leaders will ideally be familiar with the earlier book and will refer their teachers to it—especially chapters 4–7, which contain detailed information on curriculum and instruction in the core subject areas.

As we'll see in Chapter 1, there is an emerging reverence for the power of simplicity in the workplace. It is critical to effective leadership, productive work, and employee satisfaction. The essence of simplicity is concision and clarity: a tight, near-exclusive focus on the lowest possible number of the most effective and manageable actions and expectations. Simplicity demands that leaders *incessantly* clarify and reinforce these priorities. This book's immodest claim is that focused, straightforward efforts can enable leaders to achieve significant, transformative improvements within one or two school years. The reason for my optimism is that most schools suffer predominantly from certain obvious

but crippling shortcomings—namely, a lack of the following three essential elements:

1. A coherent, content-rich curriculum
2. A solid amount of traditional literacy tasks and activities
3. Effective, soundly structured lessons

The power of these three elements has overwhelmingly been established by research—as has the evidence that they are manifestly rare in schools. Once we acknowledge their importance, however, we create an unprecedented opportunity for school or district leaders to have a swift and significant effect on teacher performance and student achievement.

To give you a sense of how powerful the three elements are, consider two very different school districts. School #1 is much like the majority of schools I've visited in dozens of states. Though it's the highest-rated school in a "good" district, I found that *not a single teacher appeared to know how to deliver a nominally effective lesson*. Moreover, every school I visited in the district employed a default curriculum that mostly consisted of short-answer worksheets and excessive amounts of group work. Every year, the district provided schools with a panoply of programs, trainings, and professional development options and initiatives. But there was no attempt—as the central office staff fully conceded—to monitor or refine the implementation of any of these.

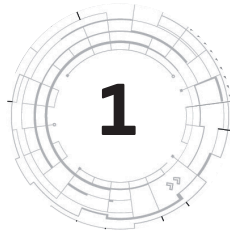
School #2 (one of a few that I discuss in detail in Chapter 3 of this book) wasn't perfect. But it was in a district where leadership ensured that all teachers and leaders were thoroughly trained in the basic structure of effective lessons—more specifically, lessons that reflect what virtually every researcher

now agrees is central to effective teaching: the teacher's close, ongoing attention to *how many students are succeeding on each step of the lesson*. All teachers in the district were hired—and retained—on the basis of their explicit commitment to mastering and consistently delivering such lessons.

It should be obvious that the stark difference between these two schools is *leadership*. This book is an attempt to explicate and clarify the kinds of straightforward leadership practices employed in School #2. Make no mistake: such practices would enable record numbers of schools to provide high-quality instruction with unprecedented consistency—thus enabling record numbers of students to become knowledgeable, literate, productive citizens. To that end, I've organized the book as follows:

- **Chapter 1** makes the case for simple, focused school leadership, demonstrating the unrivalled power of such an approach for swiftly and substantively improving the quality of work done by both teachers and leaders.
- **Chapter 2** examines the three core elements that I believe should be the focus of leadership efforts in the great majority of schools.
- **Chapter 3** offers examples of schools and districts that have embraced the power of simple, focused school leadership.
- **Chapter 4** provides a flexible implementation guide—a “starter kit” of sorts—for ensuring focused leadership in schools and districts.

Let's now turn our attention to the power of focus for transforming leadership and the quality of our schools.



Focused Leadership: Doing Less—and Doing It Better



The real path to greatness, it turns out, requires simplicity and diligence. . . . It demands each of us to focus on what is vital—and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions.

—Jim Collins



Jim Collins' book *Good to Great* (2001) is the best-selling management book of our generation. At its heart is a profound claim: that ordinary human beings can become exceptional leaders. How? By radically simplifying the work of leadership. To succeed, leaders must carefully select, severely limit, and then persistently clarify (and clarify, and clarify) the work to be done by those they lead. They must also reject anything that distracts them from their focus. In short, they must embrace *simplicity*.

An exciting body of research affirms the power of simplicity in any workplace. It is essential to both organizational and personal improvement, and it succeeds because it acknowledges the very real limits of people's time, talent, and concentration. Applied simplicity defines and clarifies precisely what leaders and employees need to focus on—and *what they must be given explicit permission to ignore*. We do our best work when the scope and focus of the work are crystal clear and limited only to what matters most at any given time (Siegel & Etzkorn, 2013; Maeda, 2006).

Focusing on essentials *creates precious time* for us to repeatedly and routinely practice and refine our efforts with minimal distraction or anxiety. When both leaders and employees are given a limited, manageable set of clear priorities or strategies and the opportunity to practice and receive feedback on them, both improvement and enhanced work satisfaction are all but inevitable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Clear, manageable expectations reduce friction and misunderstandings between leaders and employees. Rather than limit our capacities, they make us more imaginative, productive, and proficient at what we do (Buckingham, 2005). They facilitate execution and allow us to work both faster and smarter. Clear, focused leadership reduces cognitive overload and confusion and makes work easier, more engaging, and pleasurable (Jensen, 2000). It allows us to work with greater confidence and competence. Simplicity promotes consistently high performance, with concomitant results. In our case, that means more teachers who truly know how to teach essential content and skills effectively.

Decades of research by prominent researchers in both education and industry back up the importance of focusing exclusively on a narrow set of priorities (Goodwin, 2011; Buckingham, 2005; Siegel & Etzkorn, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Collins, 2001; Jensen, 2000; Maeda, 2006). To succeed best, leaders must severely limit their focus to the most effective actions and repeatedly—even obsessively—clarify their expectations around those actions. If we can simplify (and, in the process, demystify) effective school leadership, we will multiply the number and proportion of ordinary people who become effective leaders.

“Hedgehog” Focus

Success, Collins tells us, is not the result of complex efforts or innovation, but rather a result of simplicity and diligence applied to an extremely limited set of core concepts or actions. His hero is the single-minded hedgehog of Aesop’s fable “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” The hedgehog knows well enough to repeat the same simple, ancient practice that always guarantees its safety. Rather than innovate, it does what has always enabled it to thrive: it rolls up into a protective ball. In this way, the hedgehog always triumphs against the complex, unfocused machinations of the fox.

A fairly simple formula emerges from Collins and others whose work focuses on simplicity:

- Carefully determine and severely reduce your focus to the fewest and most manageable priorities,
- Emphatically and repeatedly clarify those priorities throughout your organization, and

- Ensure that everyone stays focused on those priorities and fully commits to them through practice, reflection, and refinement.

To maintain focus, leaders must attain “piercing clarity” regarding their selected priorities and their absolute primacy (Collins, 2005, p. 17). *Clarifying the organization’s priorities is the leader’s single most important job* (Buckingham, 2005); success is the result of achieving “unbelievable clarity” about what people should focus on and practice (Jensen, 2000, p. 15). As Siegel and Etzkorn put it, “clarity makes for simplicity” (2013, p. 6). Leaders must see that without constant clarification, work will inevitably become more complex. People are easily diverted; an organization’s “hedgehog” priorities will only be understood and properly implemented if the leader ceaselessly clarifies which actions do and don’t support them.

Leaders, then, must unabashedly explain, illustrate, and advocate for what matters most. And they must just as doggedly clarify what the organization *will not* do: “hedgehog” focus can’t be sustained in a climate of distraction, with people’s time and attention being pulled in several directions at once. Simplicity “demands each one of us to focus on what is vital and to ignore the rest” (Collins, 2001, p. 91). *That’s* simplicity.

If leaders and teachers were to attain piercing clarity about what actions matter most; if we were equally clear about the value and impact of those actions; if we learned and practiced them with “simplicity and diligence” (Collins, 2001, p. 104)—something stunning would happen for our students. To that end, let’s examine a small set of leadership actions

and principles—a working formula for ensuring the successful implementation of effective elements of good schooling.

A Simple Formula for Effective Leadership

The notion of a “formula” for effective school leadership may sound glib or simplistic—a perversion of simplicity. But as Collins and others demonstrate, there are times when even a fairly simple framework represents our best opportunity to move forward (in Brosnan, 2015).

There are five steps to our formula for effective leadership:

1. Research
2. Reduction
3. Clarification
4. Repeated practice
5. Monitoring

Step 1: Research—Carefully

Leaders’ effectiveness depends mightily on what they determine to be what Stephen Covey calls “first things” (Covey, 1989): the best possible actions or practices for their school at a given time. Even if we differ on best practices, it is critical that we make decisions on the basis of good evidence rather than popular appeal. (Alas: schools are not, in the main, evidence-based cultures.) Leaders at every level have traditionally embraced what is popular over what is proven (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Goodwin, 2011). We see this everywhere. Our bias toward what’s popular surely explains our unfounded but steadfast belief in the power of instructional technology (Berliner & Biddle, 1995;

Fullan, 2011; Cuban, 2011). Or consider popular but wholly unproven pedagogic fads, like insisting that students learn best when grouped by ability or “learning style.” (These methods have been roundly debunked: see Goodwin, 2011; Willingham, 2009a; Schmoker, 2010.) The vast majority of fads in education are not based on reliable evidence.

Leaders need to make rational, hard-headed choices about what works. Of course, a problem soon emerges: there are many highly effective, proven practices out there. But if we try to do too many of them, our work will “complexify”—and we’ll fail. Why? Because, once again, success depends on how much time we can realistically apportion to training and practicing—and training, and practicing—with new methods until everyone has successfully mastered them and made them a habit. This is an iron law of implementation success. But in case you haven’t noticed, schools offer an excruciatingly limited amount of time to train and master new practices.

So to succeed, we have to *reduce*.

Step 2: Reduce—Until It Hurts

As John Maeda points out, “The first principle of simplicity is: reduce” (2006, p. 1). Once we have done the research, we must select from among various initiatives on the basis of what is most effective for us right now. I’m reminded of how Steve Jobs would ask his best employees to develop a list of their 100 favorite ideas, then discuss them until they had decided on the best 10. Of those 10, Jobs would choose only 3 for the company to actually work on that year (Isaacson, 2012).

According to Stephen Covey, the most important single leadership principle is *first things first*. Leaders must focus on their highest priorities *before* they attend to anything else. Time devoted to “second” or “third” things is time subtracted from *first* things, which are always starved for time to begin with.

Take the case of curriculum. There is considerable agreement that no method of teaching, however effective, can make up for the absence of a curriculum: a clear guide to what teachers should teach, and the approximate order in which they should teach it, for every course (Darling-Hammond, 2010). No new pedagogy or technology can succeed where the default curriculum consists largely (as too many do) of short-answer worksheets and aimless group activities. In almost every school, there is an urgent need for coherent curriculum; it is a quintessential “first thing.” It is foolish to pursue any improvement initiative until work is under way and deadlines are set for completing it.

Success hinges on how much time we can devote to ensuring mastery and successful implementation of any new practice, especially during the early stages. When will we learn that even one new initiative requires far more time for training, practicing, and monitoring than leaders typically allot? This is why Collins, like Maeda, is emphatic on the importance of reduction. His work provides a warning and a promise: don’t emulate the fox (whose multiple, complex machinations always fail). Emulate the lowly hedgehog—who executes just one, manifestly proven practice and *always triumphs*.

Severely limiting the number of initiatives you choose to implement isn't easy. It is difficult to maintain a focus on these alone until they are fully implemented and mastered. But this focus enables us to leverage improvement's most precious resource: the time necessary to exhaustively and repeatedly *clarify* and train people in best practices.

In *So Much Reform, So Little Change* (2011), Charles Payne found that our tendency to pursue new initiatives means that there simply isn't enough time for us to accurately convey essential information about any of them. As a result, misunderstandings multiply, implementation fails, and faculty experiences "social demoralization" (p. 30). If we want better schools, we must embrace economy and focus. We must also revere *clarity*—indeed, we must be so clear about our highest priorities that no one could possibly misunderstand or improperly implement our most essential and effective practices.

Step 3: Clarify—Obsessively

If you do nothing else as a leader, be clear.

—Marcus Buckingham

The field of education has not historically made clarity a priority. Surely we know this. We seldom explain, train, and reiterate the most essential practices with sufficient depth and intensity for everyone to achieve at least minimal mastery (Payne, 2011). The cause of clarity hasn't been helped by the fact that our profession routinely traffics in what one observer called "mendacious babble" (Mitchell, 1981, p. viii). Leaders should shun the jargon of academic educationism. Some of our most popular terms never acquired a clear

definition in the first place and can thus mean almost anything to anyone (e.g., “metacognition,” “balanced literacy,” “active learning,” “differentiated instruction,” “student-centered,” “learning styles”). The use of such terms wreaks havoc on the clear communication that is essential to improved practice. Our sloppy imprecision is evident in the tortured formulations of many of the Common Core standards and in our unconscionably muddled, jargon-laced teacher evaluation templates (see Chapters 3 and 4). Lack of clarity is far more consequential than we know. To be effective, schools must develop a clear, common understanding of essential professional terms (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

An old friend of mine with an extensive business resume (executive with Procter & Gamble, global head of marketing for Pepsi, chief operating officer of eBay) once told me that the most important early leadership lesson he learned was the need for clarity. He learned the hard way that to bring out the best in employees, leaders must meticulously craft every communication—every goal and directive—and then check with employees to make sure that they properly understood the message. Clarity is essential to productive action.

Perhaps nothing could be more important for educators right now than clarity—about their work, priorities, and practices. For decades, I’ve seen how average educators aren’t sufficiently clear on the most fundamental concepts of schooling (curriculum, literacy, and effective teaching). In the words of management expert Tom Peters, “

communication always sucks. . . . It’s the human condition. . . . To make communication even halfway decent, even half the time, you’ve got to work like hell

at it . . . all the time. (quoted in Jensen, 2000, p. 24).

Leaders need to “work like hell” at clear communication. All teachers need and deserve leaders who make strenuous efforts to clearly and continuously communicate the most essential concepts and practices. They need leaders to do this with precision and—just as important—*repetition* (more on this in a moment).

Why haven't most educators mastered the most fundamental elements of good schooling? Because we haven't made clarity a priority. To achieve such clarity, leaders must ensure that someone on their staff explains and teaches and models critical concepts and practices multiple times, with follow-up and reinforcement, probably for the length of teachers' careers. Such focused clarification, modeling, and practice are hardly typical of most professional development, which is typically cursory, shallow, and imprecise. That's because precious time, so essential to achieving “piercing clarity,” too often gets shifted to other, ever-newer initiatives. And so our training only leaves traces of true understanding. The result? In the great majority of our schools, students are routinely deprived of the game-changing power of best practices (Odden, 2009; Hirsch, 2009; Marzano, 2007).

The successful schools and districts I describe in this book were exceptionally aware of the critical connection between a reduced, “hedgehog”-style focus and the opportunity for teachers to achieve “piercing clarity” with respect to their priorities. At these schools, it would be difficult for practitioners not to know—or to forget—what was expected of them. But clarity also requires something else: practice. We don't really, deeply understand effective instruction

and implementation *until we do it*. Practice—repeated, even “guided” practice, with feedback—is integral to clarity.

Step 4: Practice—Repeatedly

Teaching is a performance art; it requires hands-on training and practice (Pondiscio, 2014). The same is true of properly implementing curriculum and establishing effective literacy practices. We can only attain mastery in our performance of these core elements through repeated practice.

We need plenty of time and multiple opportunities to practice what we learn about the essential components of a good lesson—about how to teach students to analytically read, discuss, and write about various texts. None of the steps involved in mastering these elements is particularly complicated—in fact, they beg to be simplified. But they must be practiced. Repeatedly. Until teachers master their essential moves. This is where operative understanding takes root.

We simply don't engage enough in repeated practice. Institutionally, we never have. Our professional development days, faculty and department meetings must include and be followed by practice sessions as a matter of course. In every training, practitioners need opportunities to actually attempt to employ each major element of a good lesson in small or class-sized groups of their peers—with guidance and feedback—until it is apparent that all have mastered essential practices. If some don't, they need to be given additional time and opportunities to do so.

How important is repeated practice? Consider John Wooden. Perhaps the greatest college basketball coach of all time, he coached UCLA to 10 national championships—7 of them

consecutive. Wooden was *obsessed* with repeated practice of basketball fundamentals. His recipe for success was old fashioned and simple. As he put it: “I created eight laws of learning, namely, explanation, demonstration, imitation, repetition, repetition, repetition, repetition, and repetition” (Torbett, 2012, p. 1).

Wooden didn’t “innovate”; even his admirers said his approach was from “the 1920s” (Bisheff & Walton, 2004, p. 104). He ceaselessly explained and demonstrated effective practices by having his players repeat fundamentals until they became second nature. Wooden’s players didn’t just learn—they *overlearned* by repeating best practices “ad nauseam” (p. 104). His players initially resisted—until they came to realize that Wooden’s approach had made them world-class players. After college, they found that their overlearning had given them a huge advantage over other players in the NBA.

Leaders should have teachers overlearn best practices, too. Teachers need leaders who aren’t bashful about the need to strenuously and repeatedly clarify and provide practice opportunities for teachers to learn and overlearn the fundamentals. We need to train and retrain in the most vital practices until teachers demonstrate mastery—and then periodically retrain again to ensure against forgetfulness and drift. It’s because we as a profession haven’t embraced the importance of repetition that good practices are still so very rare, even in so-called good schools (Odden, 2009; Marzano, 2007; Elmore, 2000).

The work of leaders like Doug Lemov (author of *Teach Like a Champion*) and Paul Bambrick-Santoyo speaks to the

importance of practice. In their “Uncommon Schools” network, Lemov and Bambrick-Santoyo arrange for teachers to learn their craft by being shown, explicitly and repeatedly, how to master a certain teaching method. Then the teachers try the new method on an audience of their peers, during training—and repeat the process until they pass muster.

If we want to turn the corner on making effective practice the new norm, then we must make *repeated, mastery-based practice* the new norm first. Any leader can arrange for this to happen. Repeated practice must become the new model of professional development, of college and university teacher preparation, and of department meetings.

Last, but hardly least: leaders must monitor to ensure school- and districtwide quality and consistency.

Step 5: Monitor—and Respond Immediately

What gets measured and monitored gets done. It should go without saying that leaders must obsess over essential practices and how well they’re being implemented. Monitoring should involve a combination of classroom observation, brief meetings, and periodic reviews of data.

Though it’s an essential aspect of supervision, monitoring has become a lost art; in most schools, we only pretend to do it. We avoid monitoring because it can often be difficult and unpleasant. We don’t yet see that with greater clarity, focus, and repeated practice, monitoring and supervision can become positive experiences for all. Effective supervisory routines are essential and need not be either onerous or time-consuming (as the examples in Chapter 4 will make clear).

Importantly, monitoring should mainly be confined to those aspects of performance that are the most clear, objective, and observable—those areas where teachers have received ample and repeated training and guidance. The trouble begins when we monitor or evaluate for unclear or subjective aspects of teaching. When we evaluate and critique practices that haven't been abundantly and repeatedly clarified, teachers will feel unjustly criticized.

To the greatest extent possible, monitoring should be a positive and productive process. We can ensure this by focusing on practices that teachers have had ample opportunity to learn and rehearse until they reach mastery. Under these conditions, monitoring should mostly consist of capturing and celebrating progress and increased consistency, with plenty of opportunities to compliment practitioners.

Leaders must never make the mistake of thinking that essential practices are so ingrained that they no longer need to be monitored. We've already seen what comes of that mindset—a scarcity of the most critical and highly effective practices in schools.

Focused Leadership

I'll end with a story about a familiar company. I hope it helps to illustrate (if somewhat imperfectly) the principles explored in this chapter: the need to identify and reduce our focus to "first things" based on the best evidence available, to clarify our priorities strenuously, to then practice and repractice to mastery, and to monitor to ensure quality and consistency.

Several years ago, Starbucks president Howard Schultz began an effort to bring the company, which was in a very deep slump, back from the brink of failure. Facing myriad problems, Schultz made a pivotal decision to focus on Starbucks' "first thing": the ability of the average barista to create high-quality espresso on a consistent basis.

As with teaching, there is a lot more to making a high-quality espresso than merely hurrying through the motions. Careful attention must be paid to each step in the process. Starbucks monitors the quality of its espressos, and the company's internal data revealed that both the quality and consistency had dropped precipitously over time. For Schultz, this decline in quality violated "the essence of what we set out to do 40 years ago" (2011, p.4).

Against strong advice, Schultz decided to stop for a moment and focus the company's attention—its "hedgehog" focus—on just this one thing. To make clear his commitment, he temporarily shut down every Starbucks in the United States and required every barista to be retrained in the art of making a high-quality espresso. Every single barista received additional training and targeted feedback in this core process. In the short run, Starbucks lost money and some of its market share. But the quality and consistency of espressos began to surge—immediately. The time spent retraining and practicing the core process not only increased the quality and consistency of espresso but also proved to be a "galvanizing event" and the beginning of a stunning turnaround for the company's fortunes (p. 7).

I hope you'll notice that none of the actions Schultz took are particularly complicated. Exceptional leadership requires us

to choose the right things to focus on and then devote our ongoing efforts to them with “simplicity and diligence.”

In the next chapter, we will more deeply examine the case for the three fundamental elements of effective education—“hedgehog concepts” that we can expect to make a sizeable and immediate difference in the majority of our schools.

Discussion Questions and Action Steps

Action Step 1: Assessing for Focus. All members of the leadership team place a checkmark by the statements below that they believe are currently true for the school or district. If they are not certain about an item, they are to leave it unchecked.

___ We have identified a *severely limited* number of amply proven “hedgehog” practices and expectations for their implementation.

___ We have structures in place for ensuring that every teacher, regardless of experience, is aware of core priorities.

___ Our school leaders reiterate core expectations and connect them to the agenda topics at every faculty meeting.

___ Our leaders know, at any given time, at the *school level*, precisely what practices most require our immediate attention.

___ Our leaders know, at any given time, which *individual teachers or groups of teachers* need additional clarification and practice in core practices.

___ We have built routines into the formal schedule for addressing school and teacher needs immediately, the moment they are identified.

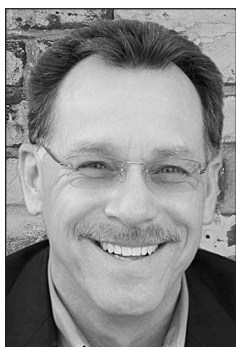
___ We provide frequent, routine opportunities during department and team meetings for teachers to

___ Observe a demonstration lesson by a coach or colleague.

___ Take turns *practicing* selected elements of effective, curriculum-based teaching, with colleagues role-playing as students.

Action Step 2: Planning Focused Action. Members of the leadership team compare their responses to the checklist and reach a group consensus regarding the items on which they need to focus. Of these, leaders should ask: What actions and routines can we implement to ensure simple, clear, repetitious communication, ongoing practice, and effective monitoring of a severely limited number of carefully selected core practices? Leaders then consider current practices that may be stealing precious time from the core priorities they've identified—programs, routines, professional development initiatives, and any other undertakings that distract from the important “hedgehog” practices.

About the Author



Mike Schmoker is a former administrator, English teacher, and football coach. He has written six books and dozens of articles for educational journals, newspapers, and *Time* magazine. His most recent book is the best-selling *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning* (2011); his previous best-seller, *Results Now* (2006), was a finalist for the Association of Education Publishers' Book of the Year award.

Schmoker is the 2014 recipient of the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Distinguished Service award for his publications and presentations. He has consulted and keynoted throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, China, and Jordan. He currently lives in Tempe, Arizona, with his wife, Cheryl. Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.