

Introduction

This book represents the culmination of a decade of collaboration. It brings together concepts from the for-profit, nonprofit, and education worlds. It mixes in ideas from parenthood and the principalship. It represents an amalgamation of models from the business literature and the education literature. It results from a partnership between a parent who was involved in leadership development in the business sector and a principal working in large urban and suburban high schools. For both of us, the challenge was the same: What can we do to develop more effective leaders in our schools?

At the outset, we realized that we shared this common goal despite our different career paths. We challenged each other, sharing notes from books, observations on magazine articles, and questions such as “That’s all very well, but what do *you* do if . . . ?” Both of us benefited enormously from the give and take, learning and teaching a great deal along the way.

We looked for opportunities to bring bottom line-oriented business thinking to the increasingly competitive world of public education. We looked for ways to bring the passion and commitment of public education into the workaday world of researchers and engineers and middle managers. We chose not to focus on the obvious differences between business and education. Rather we focused on both simply as organizations and looked for fundamental similarities. What works there, and how might it work here?

The first months (or years) in any new position serve as a proving ground, inevitably offering on-the-job training even if you didn’t think you needed it. You may go through a formal training program—Supervisory Development or Principal Licensure—but you still have to face the reality of dealing with real live people in real time in your organization. The demands are numerous, unexpected, and often competing. And you want to do your best by your people, by your organization, and especially for those who benefit from the services your organization provides. The fact is that leading an organization is a difficult job, a mix of the urgent and the important, the short term and the long term, the safe and the risky.

While visiting Bill Sommers, Michael Ayers noticed a copy of a reference manual on the coffee table. That led to a discussion about how wonderful it would be if there were something like a field manual for principals—a guide to understanding and operating *a school as an organization*. To be useful, the manual would need to offer a clear overall structure and simultaneously support essentially random access to specific topics. The table of contents should reflect the overall structure, showing how the authors had organized the principal’s world in a calm, rational way and what questions they tried to answer, just in case someone decided to actually read an entire section at once. Then an effective index should support the random access to specific topics needed right now, in the moment, to deal with something that just came up. And graphics—the manual must complement the written word with helpful explanatory graphics.

That’s what we have adopted as the goal—a calm rational structure supported by a panic-driven index complemented by good graphics. We want to honor your commitment

to education. We know you are busy, so we have tried to make this reference manual as accessible as possible to save you time.

This field manual carries the subtitle *The School Principal as the Organizational Leader*. The prevailing emphasis in education recently has featured the principal as an “instructional leader.” Surely, a principal must know something about teaching; but to construe the role primarily as a super teacher is, we believe, misguided. Research reveals that leadership ranks number two among school-related factors—behind only teacher quality—in terms of factors impacting student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). We offer what we believe is set of approaches, models, and techniques that can help.

We view the principal as the chief executive officer (CEO) of the school. The principal is the only person in the school with responsibility for the entire school, just as the CEO does for a business. No other role within the school or business has this accountability. This calls for abilities as a leader, as a manager, and as an administrator. The principal’s focus should be on making the staff and thus the organization effective as a whole. The principal ought not devote all of his or her emphasis narrowly to supervising the practice of teachers, although this is obviously an essential task. After all, there are budgets to balance, community relations to foster, and district/interschool issues that require attention.

Indeed, if you look at the research of the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), you will see quite clearly that of 21 principal leadership responsibilities that it identifies, those that most strongly correlate to improved student performance are organizational, rather than curricular as many would expect! Figure 1 shows the top five responsibilities that correlate with improved student performance (see the entire list in Appendix 1 on page 125).

Note that *none* of these top five are exclusively the domain of schools: Every organizational leader must show situational awareness. Every organizational leader must offer intellectual stimulation to the staff. Every organizational leader must seek input for important decisions. The next 8 also are universal; in fact only 2 of the 21 are education

Figure 1 Top Five Leadership Responsibilities That Correlate With Student Achievement

| Responsibility | Description | Correlation |
|--------------------------|--|-------------|
| Situational Awareness | is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems | 0.33 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture | 0.32 |
| Input | involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies | 0.30 |
| Change Agent | is willing to and actively challenges the status quo | 0.30 |
| Culture | fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation | 0.29 |

SOURCE: From *School Leadership that Works*, by R. Marzano, T. Waters, and B. McNulty, 2005, pp. 42–43. Copyright 2005 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Reprinted with permission.

specific! The bottom line is that leading an effective educational organization has an enormous degree of overlap with leading any other effective organization.

After much thought and discussion, we settled on using the categories contained in the Organizational Effectiveness Model from The Commonwealth Practice (TCWP).¹ Michael Ayers currently serves as CEO of TCWP and participated in the development of this model while employed at a Fortune 500 company. Within that company, the model was used to diagnose effectiveness issues with several divisions. It was later used to diagnose issues at a large suburban high school. Thus the model has demonstrated its usefulness in several real organizations.

The Organizational Effectiveness Model serves as the broad organizing framework for the current manual. Each of the five major categories in the framing model represents a broad area of concern in pulling together any effective organization, as you will see as you read further.

We have read many articles and books, and we have attended many workshops over the years. Although acquiring knowledge about management and leadership is important as it adds to our theoretical knowledge base, using that knowledge in real situations is where a leader creates value within the organization!

We have to issue a general caveat here at the outset. All of the models, processes, and ideas presented here have worked. All of the models, processes, and ideas have also *not* worked. We do not know of anything that works all the time. That is why we have provided many models, processes, and ideas. When one thing doesn't work, the well-equipped leader can try another one.

Many people read to find answers to problems. This is a good thing. However, there is no silver bullet or magic pill. Quit looking for it. The learning search for leaders involves both building their repertoire and developing the ability to use that repertoire when facing real problems in real time with real staff, students, and community. At the end of each of the five major sections of this book, we have included a top-ten list of good reference books you might find useful.

If you absolutely insist on looking for one answer, here it is.

If what you're doing isn't working, try something else.

That is the only thing we have found to work. We wish you well in your work and career.

THE FRAMING MODEL—FACETS OF EFFECTIVENESS

First let us remind you that this model is just that—a *model*, an arbitrary simplification of a complex reality. Thus we offer the following caveat:

All models are wrong. Some models are useful.

1. The Commonwealth Practice (www.thecommonwealthpractice.com) is a very small consulting firm.

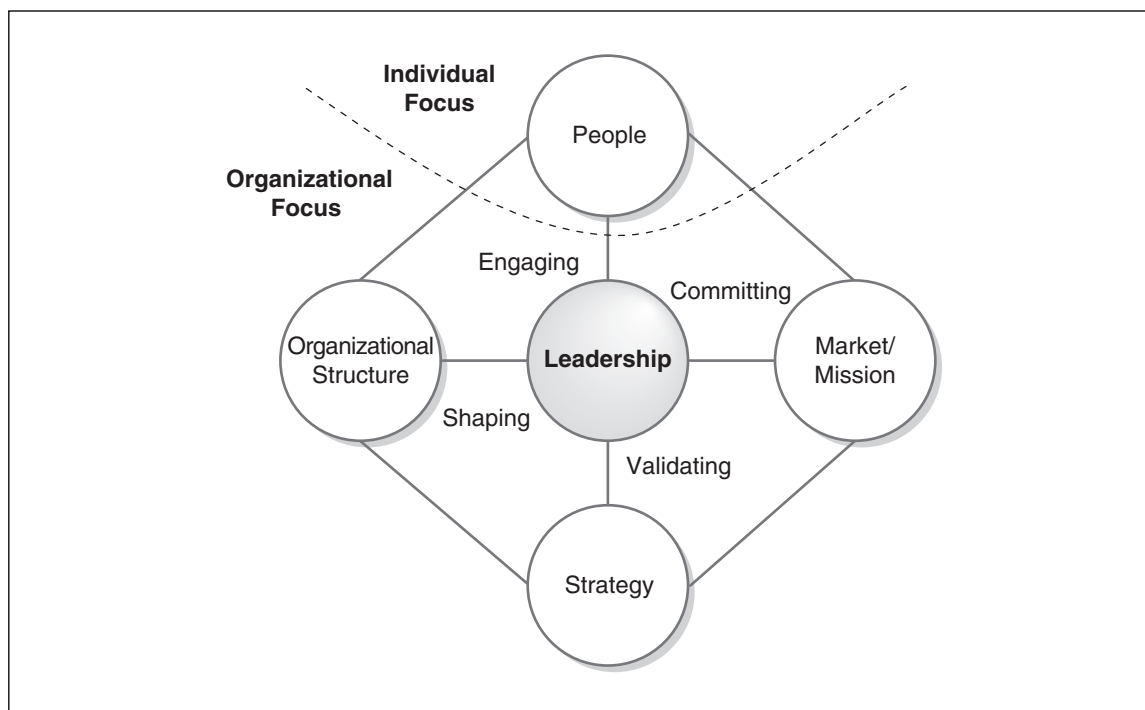
These are the words of George Box, a Canadian statistician. He meant that all models are human devices intended to serve a specific purpose, including only a few elements while omitting many others. We readily admit the limitations of the model that frames the contents of this book, but nonetheless hope that you will find it useful.

The Organizational Effectiveness Model (Figure 2) presents, on a single page, a simplified view of the key facets of any effective organization. In essence, it asks the leadership to be clear about five very large questions:

1. What central role must leadership play in holding things together?
2. What is our organization's mission?
3. How will we accomplish it?
4. How must we organize ourselves?
5. Who will we be?

The rest of this introduction explores the framing model in a little more detail.²

Figure 2 Organizational Effectiveness Model



2. For a narrative exploration of the development of the model, visit <http://www.thecommonwealthpractice.com/resources.htm> and click on White Papers/Provocations.

Start at the 3 o'clock position on the model. The premise is that we create and sustain an organization to accomplish a purpose. We call that the *mission*, and that mission involves providing a valued service (or product) to a specific audience (market). Without this mission being clear to all, the organization is literally without direction. The role of *leadership* (at the center of the model) is to commit the organization to the accomplishment of that mission.

Moving to 6 o'clock, we encounter the *strategy*: how does the organization intend to deliver on that commitment? What will it do? What will it not do? The role of leadership here is to validate the strategy by ensuring that it falls within reasonable expectations and prevailing constraints.

Moving to 9 o'clock, we find *organizational structure*. How will we organize ourselves? How will we divide the organization's overall responsibilities into coherent roles within the organization? What are the organization's values? How will we balance policies and procedures (for consistency) with professional judgment (for the sake of evolving circumstances)? The role of leadership here is to shape the organization.

In moving to 12 o'clock, we cross a boundary—we move from a largely organizational focus to a largely individual focus, one that focuses on the *people* who comprise the organization. What must our people be able to do? How will we find the right people and get them into the right positions? How can we keep them here and enthusiastic? The role of leadership here is to fully engage the people.

Also note that as you sweep around from 3 o'clock to 12 o'clock, leadership will find increased volatility. In other words, mission and market are less likely to change (thus requiring episodic updates), whereas people are much more likely to change (thus requiring continuous vigilance).

On the horizontal axis, the structure must serve and support the mission. On the vertical axis, the people must understand and apply the strategy. Those two axes come together at the central hub, where we find leadership.

Note that it is *leadership* that an organization must have, not a single leader. In the most robust and resilient organizations, anyone can step forward to provide leadership when that individual is best positioned and best equipped. And no one need be threatened; no one's place is jeopardized by that. As Ira Chaleff (1995) notes, the sooner we get comfortable with the idea of powerful followers supporting powerful leaders, the sooner we can fully develop dynamic, self-responsible, synergistic relationships in our organizations. Each person will be both willing and able to lead *and* to follow.

We also differentiate between several different facets of being a person in position of authority—what we call the *PPA*. That position typically includes a dynamic and complex mix of elements:

- *leadership* strongly tied to and focused on the future
- *management* strongly connected to allocating resources in the present
- *administration* largely focused on implementing policies and practices established elsewhere in the hierarchy
- *supervision*, direct oversight of members of the workforce

While these operational definitions may sound unfamiliar, we believe that understanding their different emphases offers a richer understanding of the role of the school principal. For example, as the leader, you help shape the organization's mission and values—how you expect the staff to behave and what you intend to accomplish. You are leading the organization into uncharted waters. As the manager, you decide

how to allocate limited resources across various grades and subjects. You are managing to get things done. As the administrator, you may find yourself enforcing personnel and student discipline policies created by the superintendent or school board. You are simply administering the policy on zero tolerance. (Interestingly, *administrator* is the most common general title used for the people in charge of a school, and it is also the least creative facet of the role!) As the supervisor, you monitor and evaluate the performance of the staff. You engage in curricular supervision to determine whether the teachers are using the new curriculum and building supervision to ensure that the hallways are clean.

Here's an example of how this model might play out for a specific school.

Winding Path Elementary School (WPES) serves a second-ring suburb with an increasingly diverse student population. To achieve the desired demographic student mix, the district has selected WPES to become a magnet school with an International School theme. WPES has decided to change its *mission* slightly to focus on "children of families with strong global interest." That change will require corresponding changes in the *strategy* to incorporate the inclusion of several world languages into the curriculum. That, in turn, will necessitate evolving the *structure* to include a new languages department within the school's various teams. Of course, it will also mean identifying and hiring qualified *people*, skilled in the chosen languages. The *leadership* of the school (including the principal and teacher leaders) will need to make a compelling case for the change, oversee development of a project plan for the conversion, and ensure that scarce resources are allocated effectively.

The highlighted words in the description of this hypothetical school bring us back to the TCWP model: mission, strategy, structure, people, leadership.

The subsequent sections of this guide appear in the same sequence as the TCWP model. We start with Leadership (of the organizational variety!) and then consider Mission, Strategy, Organizational Structure, and People. Within these sections, we identify a series of techniques and tools. We define a *technique* as a broad approach or method you might find useful. To be fully effective, a technique must be highly internalized so that you can use it fluently. We define a *tool* as something you can employ in a given situation. Since it can be stored in your toolbox, you can more easily show a tool to others and help them see how you use it.

For example, in operating an automobile, keeping your tires properly inflated is a technique for better handling and safety and also for improved gas mileage. To change a flat tire, however, you need specific tools: a jack and a lug wrench. Similarly, in operating a school, providing people with timely and specific feedback on their performance is a technique to improve their effectiveness, and thus the school's effectiveness. A specific performance evaluation worksheet is a necessary tool to use in accomplishing this task.

A good field manual ought to provide a wealth of useful material without attempting to be an encyclopedia—you don't go into the field carrying the entire *Encyclopædia Britannica*, after all! As a result, we have included in this manual practical techniques and tools within a sound theoretical framework. We have also included many references to other works for readers who choose to dig deeper into any of the topics.

We begin with two basic techniques.

TWO FUNDAMENTAL TECHNIQUES

Let us first offer preliminary thoughts on two fundamental techniques useful under nearly any circumstance. Suppose you have this situation:

I've got a teacher coming in 15 minutes from now, irate because I have required him³ to meet with other teachers to discuss student work—what do I do?

Clearly that's at too detailed a level for this manual to be of direct help. There are 472,519⁴ situations that might come up, and a manual can't deal with them all. So the principal will have to address the situation at hand, drawing upon general guidelines and suggestions.

We suggest two fundamental techniques for working in this situation: (1) applying the *Five Whys* and (2) reframing. Each of these represents a small slice of *Systems Thinking*, a technique that we believe must be solidly entrenched in every leader's toolbox.

Applying the Five Whys

You can use the Five Whys to precipitate a move from a specific situation to an underlying cause. That is, given the situation above, now what? What is behind the impending meeting? What are the central perceptions operating here? The idea is that something in "the system" sits at the root of this situation. You keep asking why until you get a more systemic cause.

1st Why: Why is it important to see this teacher now?

... Because I want to explain the circumstances from my perspective.⁵

2nd Why: Why is that important?

... Because I suspect the teacher has considered only his point of view.

3rd Why: Why should the teacher hear another perspective?

... Because we, collectively as a school, are responsible for the students' work and the teacher cannot operate effectively as though he were in private practice.

4th Why: Why is that important?

... Because I want all of the teachers to stay in communication with one another and with me.

5th Why: Why is that ongoing communication important?

... Because building and maintaining good relationships (between me and this teacher, and between this teacher and all the other teachers) is necessary to create an environment of strong trust.

3. Rather than use ugly and distracting constructs such as s/he or her/him, we will simply randomly use the female and male pronouns.

4. We made this number up. Allowing for a rounding error, we think it must be close.

5. Note that this is not the same as saying, "The teacher needs to hear my side. . . ." This is not really about what you, paternalistically, determine that the teacher needs; it's about what you want to do to respond to a challenging situation.

Thus in this case, the quick-and-dirty preliminary analysis leads to the potential use of the *Ladder of Inference* (see the topic Ladder of Inference on page 106) as a means to talk about differing interpretations and consequent actions.

The Five Whys technique represents one way of approaching Systems Thinking. Rather than looking at the immediate cause and taking it at face value, look back a little further and dig a little deeper. It makes no difference whether the issue is between two siblings within a family or two parties in an intense and adversarial labor negotiation. Almost always, you will be able to discover something else that happened in the past that you can causally link to the current situation. Looking back further in the causal chain to gain a richer understanding is a central element of Systems Thinking.

Reframing

We noted that this manual has a built-in framing model. Thus, a second way of addressing a situation is to *reframe* it, looking at it from several perspectives to see which one seems to offer an approach or solution likely to succeed.

Given the example above, consider these differing frames. Is this teacher upset because . . .

- He feels that his qualifications have been questioned or his authority undermined and this is about the value of respect? (perhaps pointing to **mission** and then organizational values)
- The teacher has drifted from being a solid contributor to becoming more of a maverick? (pointing to **people** and then followership)
- The teacher refuses to attend any meetings because his favorite class was dropped from the schedule? (pointing to **strategy** and decision making)
- The teacher has refused to share in the enforcement of homework policies and the unified grading practices? (pointing to **organizational structure** and policies)
- The teacher has told conflicting stories to two different teachers? (pointing to **leadership** and trust)

Each of these reframed interpretations could easily lead to the use of a different approach.

The reframing technique represents another way of approaching Systems Thinking. Rather than looking at any single cause and take it as the only cause, look at the situation from multiple perspectives. While there may indeed be a human resources cause, there might also be causes related to structure, mission, or other areas. In our experience, we find that two kinds of people generally promote the single-cause perspective: (1) special interest groups of all stripes and (2) disreputable consultants and other snake-oil salesmen. Not only is there always another view, in most cases there are several other legitimate views. Harlan Cleveland (1985) observed decades ago that “no conflict, negotiation, settlement, or bargain is merely two-sided” (p. 220). The more perspectives we consider, the greater the likelihood of crafting a high-leverage, enduring intervention. Looking more broadly to gain a richer understanding is another central element of Systems Thinking.