Part I

1 The Problem With PD

What I've Noticed

"If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading."

–Lao Tzu

Figure 1.1 Common Leadership Challenges

I NEED HELP ACCOMPLISHING MY BIG GOALS

CHALLENGES

- I'M ON AN ISLAND (ISOLATION)
- I DON'T TRUST MY COLLEAGUES
- I FEEL STAGNANT & INEFFECTIVE
- THE JOB IS HARD!
- I DON'T HAVE TIME/MONEY LIKE CEOS
- MY DISTRICT WON'T PAY FOR CONFERENCES
- MY DISTRICT DOESN'T BUILD MY CAPACITY

Source: Image courtesy of iStock.com/Mykyta Dolmatov.

Since 2016, it's been my privilege to serve more than one hundred school leaders from around the world in a professional development experience called the

mastermind. Over the years, I have found that leaders enroll in the mastermind for similar reasons (listed in Figure 1.1):

- I feel like I'm on an island.

- I don't trust my colleagues (local school and/ or district level).

- The job is hard!

- My district doesn't build my capacity.

- My district won't send me to conferences.

- I need support accomplishing my goals.

- I lack a network of peers to admit what I don't know and ask for help.

All of these reasons are significant and important to address. But of all the challenges cited, the most common reason leaders join the mastermind is their desire to grow. Mastermind members want to surround themselves with peers who understand the role, are committed to sharpening their skill set, and want to innovate in education. According to Paige Kinnard, a Director of Instruction at Allegany-Limestone Central Schools, "I want to run with other hungry leaders. People who are passionate about education and willing to do anything in their power to grow."

Three Lines That Explain It All

"Most geniuses—especially those who lead others— prosper not by deconstructing intricate complexities but by exploiting unrecognized simplicities."

–Andy Benoit

For professional development to be profound, it doesn't have to be a high-tech solution or a complex model. The model on which the mastermind is built is simple and powerful. There is nothing complex about it. In fact, it is what I consider common sense, but common sense isn't often common practice. Generally, the answers to questions that haunt us are right in front of us. Leaders who listen to their gut instinct and intuition have an advantage over those who do not trust themselves. I naturally used this model to create a powerful PD experience that serves school leaders. It wasn't until years after launching the mastermind that I codified the model that I call "the ABCs of powerful professional development™."[7]

Figure 1.2 contains another simple idea. It's just three lines that explain everything about what's right and what's wrong with professional development opportunities. Each line represents a continuum. The left represents suboptimal professional development that is inauthentic, is isolating, and represents missed opportunities. The right represents the categories that make up my model and lead to powerful professional development: authenticity, belonging, and challenge.

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[7] In fact, it wasn't until I started writing this book that I did the hard work of creating this model. After some generous feedback from my editor, I was challenged to organize the content more tightly in this book. Her feedback was right, but it didn't make my job any easier. I wondered how in the world I would address the feedback and organize the book you are reading right now. And then . . . Eureka! I needed a model. So I stopped writing. I took longer walks in nature and let my mind wander. Then I opened my journal and sketched out what I saw on a weekly basis in the masterminds I facilitate. That's how I created the model that ultimately became the book in your hands. I share this story to give you a little history into the process it took to bring this book to you, but I also share it as a leadership tip. Whenever you are stuck, it doesn't make sense to keep working on the challenge in front of you. It's better to (literally) walk away from the challenge and get away from the project. Listen to your inner wisdom and I promise that you'll find what you are looking for.

Figure 1.2   The Professional Development Continuum

INAUTHENTICITY ⟵⟶ AUTHENTICITY

ISOLATION ⟵⟶ BELONGING

MISSED OPPORTUNITY ⟵⟶ CHALLENGE
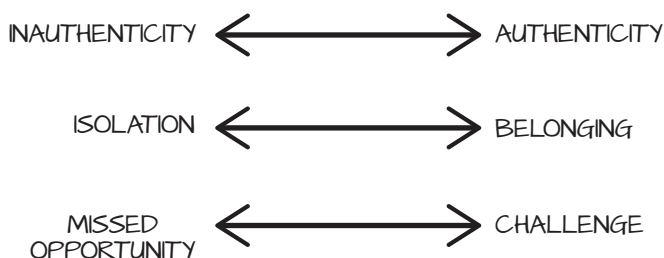
The closer you get to the ABCs, the closer you are to creating a transformational experience. The further you are from the ABCs, the further you are from real impact. I also humbly suggest that you need to be strong in all three areas for truly transformational experience. Two out of three aspects are good, but not good enough. In professional development design, keep pushing until you are strong in all three areas. This is why the community I facilitate, the mastermind, works.

In the rest of Chapter 1, we will explore the three challenges that limit the effectiveness of professional development offered to school leaders: inauthenticity, isolation, and missed opportunities.

Inauthenticity

"If you bring forth what is in you, what is in you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what is in you will destroy you."

–The Gospel of Saint Thomas

What Stops Us From Evolving?

Professional development designed for school leaders often misses the mark because of inauthenticity. Some common and poor leadership advice is to separate the

personal and the professional. In many schools, the leader operates as a robot keeping their staff distant. This is a mistake. People crave authenticity. They want to know what drives you as a leader and where the organization is going.

The inauthenticity problem also extends to the professional development offered. The most egregious example of inauthentic professional development is when it's absent altogether or offered sporadically. Instead of a "ready, aim, fire" approach, many districts get the order wrong and instead follow the inconsistent model of "ready, fire, aim." You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know this misses the mark of professional development.[8]

Whether it is a fitness goal or learning a new skill, like playing the piano, piecemeal professional development is the quickest way to exhaust resources while generating little momentum. This kind of professional development is not leverageable. It does not lead to internalization, action, and results. Simply put, this form of professional development does not work.

This form of professional development is inauthentic because it fails to *see* the administrators it aims to serve. Another reason that professional development offered by districts (or invested in by districts) is inauthentic is that it is siloed. School leaders decide to enroll in it because they are seeking diversity of thought.[9] Some leaders may ask, "Am I the only one who thinks this way in my district?" These leaders experience friction

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[8] I checked with some friends at NASA and they agree this claim *is not* rocket science.

[9] A typical mastermind cohort at Better Leaders Better Schools includes leaders from all levels of education and experience, and from not only various states within the United States, but also various countries. Not only that, we are diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and any other way you think about demographics.

in terms of applying new and innovative ideas that will help education evolve. Without the support of other innovative peers, these leaders often are frustrated to the point of giving up or leaving the profession entirely (Fuller & Young, 2009, p. 17).

Internal professional development opportunities do not address this issue; they only exacerbate the problem by creating an echo chamber that favors a confirmation bias—"We're the best district! Our ideas are amazing!"—which slows down progress and educational evolution. Therefore, this kind of professional development is inauthentic.

I'm sure you've heard the definition of insanity, which is often misattributed to Albert Einstein: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result." No matter who said it, the idea applies here to the lack of evolution regarding professional development. Much change is needed in education, but when you consider the leverage produced by developing leaders, few would argue that any other change would have a better return on investment.

Think about it. Discipline has evolved and many schools are using a restorative approach. Assessment has evolved and schools have shifted to mastery or standards-based grading. The failed zero-tolerance discipline model has been replaced by more effective programs focused on prevention, threat assessments, and restorative practices (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, pp. 853–856).[10] Instruction has evolved and students

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[10] Zero tolerance is one of the worst ideas ever used in education. It doesn't lead to better results or even a safer community. The offending student doesn't learn the lesson from the mistake made. Rather, the student learns that the school or district doesn't want them around anymore. The only appropriate use of zero tolerance is applied to zero tolerance itself. This idea in education needs to die!

are engaged with project-based and authentic problem-based learning. Teacher collaboration evolved with the introduction of professional learning communities (PLCs). But how has professional development, specifically designed for school administrators, evolved? It hasn't for most districts, and as a result they offer professional development that is experienced as inauthentic by its leaders.

Canadian neurologist and astronaut Roberta Bondar said, "So how does a business survive in constantly changing environments? When change hits, a common response is denial or trying to adapt with a business model that no longer works. We can influence the outcome of changing environments more rapidly by first recognizing that we actually need to survive and then moving to survive with new ideas" (as cited in Parrish & Beaubien, 2019, p. 216).

The same could be said for education. A lack of innovation creates inauthentic professional development. Another reason professional development is stagnant is a lack of professional awareness.

Listen to the Older Fish

In 2005, author David Foster Wallace gave the commencement speech to the graduates of Kenyon College. Below is an excerpt from his speech and book:

> "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning boys. How's the water?' And these two young fish swim on a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" (Wallace as cited in Parrish, 2012).

Professional development offered within a district can fall into the trap that the fish in Wallace's story experience. They don't even realize they are swimming in water! What a grand lack of awareness! There is a reason corporate executives, world-class athletes, and musicians hire coaches. An outside opinion matters when a leader wants to level up and operate at peak performance. Without an outside perspective, the data received are faulty; they are inauthentic.

Blind spots and echo chambers can be deadly for a leader's development, impact, and ultimate success. Being ingrained in a culture for years where everyone looks, talks, and thinks the same has an adverse effect on the type of leadership needed to be effective in an increasingly changing educational landscape. Like the fish, school administrators have difficulty separating the forest from the trees. They do not even realize that they are swimming in water. Possibly, they have forgotten what the point of education truly is— to expand the minds of students, afford them access to knowledge and experiences that wouldn't normally come their way, and generate productive members of society who will make the world a better place.

Far too many districts get swept up by the politics and pleasing of the school board and parents over serving the students. Some districts are hypnotized by test scores and make illogical decisions like extending the school day and cutting arts and physical education to make space for more reading and mathematics instruction. They believe this will lead to better student performance, but in reality it is a faulty assumption.[11]

> Without an outside perspective, the data received are faulty; they are inauthentic.

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[11] Simply practicing more doesn't lead to better outcomes, especially if the quality of instruction is poor. Practicing the right way under the tutelage of an expert leads to better outcomes. Additionally, we all need time off "to blow off steam." As an adult, I love to learn, and a good portion of each day is spent studying and writing. I also protect

The mastermind acts as the older fish. Outside perspective is a generous gift. The majority of members end up joining our group because they know they will hear perspectives that don't exist in their districts, and those perspectives are invaluable and authentic.

A lack of perspective hurts, but what happens if the older fish never appears? What if the two young fish continue to swim each day and never realize that they are in water? When that happens, you experience what experts call an "echo chamber."

I Can't Hear You in an Echo Chamber

Professional development is also inauthentic when designed in echo chambers. Sherman (2005) found that internal leadership development programs can support the status quo (p. 710). Similarly, Carmeli and Gittell's (2009) research notes that learning within organizations is often a single loop. This is unhelpful in that errors are identified and corrected, but the root causes are ignored and go unchallenged (p. 711). Humans are notoriously bad at admitting mistakes. Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) work on risk aversion and prospect theory found that humans experience mistakes and loss two times worse than what it feels like to be right (pp. 264–269).[12] This leads to an "Everything is great" attitude that

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space for creative pursuits like drawing and playing the guitar, as well as making sure I do something active each day. By taking time off to let my mind wander or engage my creative side, my body and mind are able to reboot. When I do return to work, I return fresh and ready to engage at a high level again. Our kids need this, too.
[12] Daniel Kahneman (2011) is the author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. We read this in the mastermind, and although it is dense, it is a great guide to understanding how the human mind works and the cognitive biases that hamper our thinking. Eileen, if you are reading this, I'm glad you enjoyed Kahneman's work so much!

nurtures a blind-spot-riddled, echo-chamber culture, and fosters inauthentic professional development.

We've all experienced this and it is incredibly frustrating. Every district—from the best to the worst—can suffer from creating an echo chamber. In some respects, this may be a result of strong leadership. If a leader communicates the vision well, if the people understand it and then start to act on the vision, it may become the only reality that exists. It is very difficult to share concerns or to show why a plan might fail in some districts. When groupthink exists and everyone talks the same way, there is little room for diversity of thought. You've heard the Abraham Maslow quote: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Welcome to the echo chamber.

An echo chamber hampers the collective wisdom of a group or organization. Inauthentic professional development also exists when it doesn't challenge leaders to expand their circle of competence.

Expanding Your Circle of Competence

In 2015, I joined a mastermind called Iron Sharpens Iron. The personal and professional growth I experienced in a short amount of time was tremendous. My knowledge, expertise, and, ultimately, success accelerated. This experience led to an epiphany—*who is doing this for educational leaders?* And so, the mastermind was born.

Why did I experience such tremendous growth in a short period of time?

My circle of competence grew. By leveraging the combined experience of my mastermind colleagues, I was able to learn in months what life had taught my peers over decades.

There is an anonymous quote that illustrates this point perfectly: "Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself."

Smart and persistent leaders eventually sort out their problems and figure out the challenges they face. But why take the longest route when a more efficient route exists?

According to Parrish and Beaubien (2018), there are three key practices to build and maintain a circle of competence: curiosity and a hunger for learning, monitoring, and feedback.

All leaders who enroll in the mastermind exhibit the first practice. They are extremely curious and lifelong learners. The mastermind helps in the second and third aspects of growing your circle of competence.

The mastermind helps with monitoring because it provides the structure and systems to identify goals and track progress. Parrish and Beaubien (2018) offer an interesting perspective: "[We] have a problem with honest self-reporting. We don't keep the right records, because we don't *really* want to know what we're good or bad at. Ego is a powerful enemy when it comes to better understanding reality"[13] (p. 64). This confirms what Kahneman and Tversky found in their research mentioned earlier.

The space we create in the mastermind is one where everyone is equal. We don't compete for position, authority, title, or attention. We also don't judge one another, and it helps that we don't work in the same school or district. Because of that, leaders can be

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[13] If you'd like to learn how to be a more honest self-reporter, I adapted a decision journal from Parrish's work (2014) and it's included in the Resources section (and my website for download/reproduction). I've used this decision journal on some major decisions. It's a leadership game changer and just one example of how we serve leaders within the mastermind.

radically honest about their performance, which allows the mastermind to deliver on the final point of a circle of competence—feedback.

When I peer out into the world, I do not see my face. Without a mirror, I have no idea what I look like; in fact, I might not even know I have a head if it wasn't for the mirror![14] The world just appears in the space where I am told my head exists, and it's with this perspective that I seem to be at the center of everything.

This is an unhelpful and self-obsessed way to operate in life and leadership. By seeking out external feedback, I learn two important truths: I do, in fact, have a head, and I am not at the center of the universe!

The mastermind is built to offer external feedback, help its members see what they cannot see, and offer multiple loops of feedback with helpful data that give leaders the chance to develop.

We've all gone out to dinner before, only to get home and notice that we have spinach in our teeth. Upset, we wonder if who we met for dinner are even our friends[15] if they let us go through the night with food wedged between our teeth. In the mastermind, we tell you when you have spinach in your teeth so you can show up as your best.

Inauthentic professional development is one of three problems that hamper the experience often offered to school leaders. In the next challenge we will look at an equally dangerous hurdle most leaders face—isolation.

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[14] According to Douglas Harding, I actually don't even have a head. For a wild adventure into mysticism and philosophy, check out Harding's *On Having No Head*. It might just blow your mind.

[15] They're not your friends. They're just acquaintances. Or maybe they're educators who notoriously hate conflict. And spinach!

Isolation

> *"It's hard to read the label from inside the jar."*
>
> –Joel Weldon

> *"I feel like I'm on an island. Even in New York City surrounded by other people. It's easy to exist in a bubble and I'm looking for new ideas and what other school leaders are doing around the world to be their best."*
>
> –Patrice Henry, Purple Cow member 2021

Two Years Is a Long Time . . .

How would you rate the professional development you receive in your district? Is it building your capacity and supporting your needs? Do you have access to a powerful network of outstanding colleagues who understand the complexities and challenges of your role? Or do you feel like Patrice and countless other leaders—surrounded by other people, but isolated in terms of who you can reach out to for support?

Levin et al. (2020) surveyed school leaders and found some troubling statistics. Of the 407 elementary principals who responded to their survey,

- 32 percent spent time sharing leadership practices with peers three or more times in the past two years,

- 23 percent had access to a mentor or coach in the past two years (and only 10 percent of principals who served in high-poverty schools had access to a mentor or coach), and

- 56 percent participated in a PLC three or more times in the past two years (p. vii).

Districts are failing to provide the support principals need in order to grow. This is alarming given the significant impact principals have on their schools. Although this study focused on elementary principals, we can generalize those findings to the secondary level as well.

The statistics are troubling and illustrate the lack of access to professional development and a network of peers. Isolation is a major factor in leadership stagnation, which is crazy! Of all the human beings in the school, the leader is crucial to school and ultimately student success. Why do leaders lack access to quality professional development and a network of peers?

Levin et al. (2020) also found that 84 percent of principals they studied faced obstacles to pursuing professional development. The top three obstacles were

- a lack of time (67 percent),

- insufficient building coverage (43 percent), and

- not enough money (42 percent; p. vii).

The majority of school leaders who enroll in the mastermind at Better Leaders Better Schools note that they operate on an island and are looking for connection, coaching, and mentorship. In order to grow their leadership skills, school administrators need access to a high-quality network of mentors and peers who regularly meet throughout the year. Three or more times is not sufficient. If your doctor participated in professional development less than three times in the past two years, would you still trust them with your health? If school leaders are not meeting regularly, what is the impact of isolation on their development?

If your doctor participated in professional development less than three times in the past two years, would you still trust them with your health? If school leaders are not meeting regularly, what is the impact of isolation on their development?

Isolation Is the Enemy of Excellence

It boggles my mind that leaders still operate in isolation. In Greg Salciccioli's book *The Enemies of Excellence*, the reader learns that the first and biggest enemy of excellence is isolation. We learn as children that "two heads are better than one." Intuitively, we know that it's better to have support in leadership. So why do so many leaders go it alone?

There are a multitude of factors at play. Some leaders are merely afraid to ask for help. Fear and shame prevent them from requesting help because they are afraid of being found to lack competence in an area or want to avoid appearing that they don't have the answer. Some leaders are like a hamster on a wheel, leading a frenzied life. These leaders don't make time for lunch, let alone asking others for help! Other leaders battle the problem of overconfidence and ego. After all, as the boss you were hired to be a problem solver.

Leaders who operate in isolation are destined to make more mistakes than those who lead within a powerful network of peers. Worse yet, these mistakes are preventable.

In the section on inauthentic professional development, we looked at how leaders develop blind spots and struggle to be honest with self-reporting.[16] Every leader I know has blind spots. That's normal. If you could see your blind spots, well, they wouldn't be blind spots. Leaders are generally hard workers and great at a few things. This is their circle of competence. Every specialist has a circle of competence and that's a good thing. After all, most people don't go to a physician for investing advice.

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[16] If you eat healthy and work out consistently, why don't your pants fit anymore? Really?

As school administration has grown more complex, it is impossible for leaders to be competent in every area. Yet many leaders are asked by districts to lead the way in instruction, management, finance, and marketing, just to mention a few of the hats principals wear. The mastermind is an invitation to grow your circle of competence and eliminate blind spots by substituting connection for isolation.

Unlike some districts, everyone in the mastermind is cheering for your success. We also don't evaluate our members. Therefore, we are free to share tough feedback and criticism in order to make each other better. We don't work together, so there are no messy politics to navigate. There is an application process to join, so we only enroll leaders in the mastermind who are hungry, humble, and smart.[17] Cassie, an assistant principal in Colorado, recently joined because she needed a push to get better that she wasn't receiving in her district.

Not only are many school leaders starving for honest critiques on how to improve their leadership, but individuals are also terrible at being honest with their own weaknesses. Within the mastermind there is nowhere to hide. As long as a member commits to showing up authentically, they can count on other members to push them to grow. As a result, their circle of competence grows. They are no longer leading in isolation, and with a trusted board of advisors who want them to succeed, they know they can turn to the mastermind at any time in order to make the best decision for the school community they serve.

It is difficult to maintain a circle of competence without an outside perspective. Even more difficult is finding an outside perspective that you can value and trust as a

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[17] According to Pat Lencioni, these are the qualities of top performers. I suggest you check out his book *The Ideal Team Player* for more.

school administrator. Even if you do have this network, meeting just a handful of times over two or three years will not lead to growth. The mastermind succeeds at Better Leaders Better Schools because we connect leaders from around the world who are united in their desire to get better and to participate in a community where everyone is committed to their own development and the success of others. We meet consistently and challenge our biases, decisions, and assumptions in order to grow.

We See You. We Hear You.

Principals are leaving the profession for a number of reasons. My experience has taught me—and research has shown—that principals leave because of the stress involved in the position, poor district leadership, unrealistic demands and expectations, and an inability to make the change they are committed to (versus what the district wants them to do).

I think all of those reasons principals leave could be eliminated if districts invested more time and energy into seeing and hearing their principals.

When districts treat principals as a replaceable part, or a cog in the system, it is easy to leave that kind of culture. This happens through poorly planned and executed policy that is tone-deaf, representing low emotional intelligence. It also pushes principals further into isolation. If leaders don't feel safe, the natural thing to do is withdraw, or what Brené Brown calls "armoring up."

The Pareto Principle teaches us that 20 percent of our actions drive 80 percent of the results. Upgrading the relationships between district and principal as well as investing in leadership development are areas where

districts could level up their cultures and performance. I believe relationships and leadership development are the 20 percent that lead to results.

If districts would stop obsessing over test scores and attendance data, and instead focus on relationships and leadership development, then I promise the student performance improvement would follow.

In the mastermind, we don't come with an agenda of what to accomplish. The members are our agenda. We meet them where they are and serve them there. Funny thing about that approach—the results follow.

We build in processes to keep track of what happens within our meetings. We don't allow members to hide. We call out our peers when they've made mistakes, and we do this all from a place of love. Leadership thrives in a space where people can be themselves and are fully accepted for what they bring to the table (more on this in Part II of the book).

Consider Renee's experience. She's a veteran educator who recently completed her first year of the principal-ship. Renee is attuned with her need to be connected as a leader, and during her second year as a principal, COVID-19 hit.

Renee wrote during the summer planning amidst the pandemic, "I need strength. Reassurance. Maybe just to call it what it is and move on. Who knows? I feel I'm caught in the middle of my emotions and I can go either way. I'm not used to having a problem with no idea of what I need to get through it. Right now I feel like I'm standing on a frozen body of water and it's only a matter of minutes before the ice starts cracking. Therefore, I'm afraid to move. I'm a mover and a shaker so immobility kills my spirit."

What I wrote to her was a simple text. It said, "The ice won't crack beneath your feet."

She responded, "Awww. Thank you, Danny. I always appreciate your encouragement."

Little emotional quotient (EQ) touches like this mean so much to people you serve. It communicates "I see you. I hear you. You are important to me." Not only did Renee experience that simple text as a way of being acknowledged, but she also knew that she had a powerful community that she could lean into, so even if the "ice began to crack," we wouldn't let her drown in the icy waters of isolation.

In the introduction, I noted the alarming percentage of principals who leave the profession. Bauer et al. (2019) have found that the complexity of the role and the challenges of the principalship are seen as outweighing the benefits of the role. Principals also feel solely responsible for the results of the school, which often leads to isolation. This isolation can be eradicated through the vehicle of social support like a mastermind (pp. 384–385, 394).

The Problem With Blind Spots

How does an isolated leader fix what they cannot see? Leaders need trusted advisors who can point out the natural blind spots we all have. It is truly an exceptional experience when a leader builds a team that will tell her what those blind spots are. Even more radical is a leader who demonstrates courage by acting on the feedback they receive in order to grow.

Charles Darwin said, "Ignorance more often begets confidence than knowledge" (as cited in Parrish & Beaubien, 2018, p. 72). A confident leader must open

themselves up to a feedback loop in order to sharpen their skill set and eliminate their blind spots.

One mistake I made as a new principal was a direct result of having a blind spot. Building culture is a strength and passion of mine. I prioritized celebrating achievements when staff members did something exceptional at school. I also wanted to honor our entire staff for living out our core values. To do this we formed a culture team, set up a process where staff could nominate their peers to win a culture award, and then we would celebrate them at our regular staff meetings.

This process had worked well at previous schools I led, and I expected the same at this new school.

After a few weeks of celebration, a veteran teacher spoke privately with me and let me know that the majority of the staff didn't want to be celebrated and felt uncomfortable with the celebrations. She had established clout within our school; she had taught for decades, was the math department chair, and served on several key committees. Believing her, I rolled back the celebrations at our school, only to find out this upset *the majority of the teachers!*

What was going on here? Was this teacher untrustworthy?

No, I had a blind spot and didn't investigate what she had told me.

I had been fooled. This veteran teacher had not spoken for the entirety of the staff, but rather a small subsection of teachers, if that. Maybe she only spoke for herself, and after I eliminated our celebratory culture, many teachers were upset that they weren't being celebrated. I could have easily avoided this mistake if I had brought the scenario to a network of peers. I am certain if I shared the context of what I was trying to

accomplish and what the veteran teacher told me, that I would have been given helpful and critical feedback from my mastermind peers. They would have asked questions such as the following:

- Had I checked in with a variety of staff to test the validity of what the veteran teacher told me?

- Was there value in continuing to celebrate even if teachers were uncomfortable? Was this a way to help them grow (think: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development)?

- What was the benefit of celebrating a smaller set of teachers? How could I continue to honor them?

- Why did I bring this process to the school? Why was I wanting to abandon it so quickly? Did it have enough time to catch on? How was I communicating the vision?

The mastermind would have asked me these questions and more. My thinking would have slowed down and I can guarantee that I wouldn't have rolled back the celebrations at my school so quickly. This may seem like a minor decision and blunder, but it represents how poorly we can make decisions as leaders when we go it alone.

Inauthentic experiences and isolation are two reasons professional development fails school leaders. The last reason professional development can fall short has to do with missed opportunities. There are plenty of ways we can grow and support school leaders. The opportunity is there for the taking, so why do districts so often miss the boat?

Missed Opportunities

Start close in,

don't take the second step

or the third,

start with the first

thing

close in,

the step

you don't want to take

–David Whyte, "Start Close In"

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The Power of Reframing

In 2020, my wife and I joined our best friends in Scotland, Simon and Korkor, on a hike of "The Whangie." Simon is an intelligent and lanky Scotsman who loves to laugh and dance.[18] He can hike a mountain in just a handful of strides. I nearly had to sprint each mountain we hiked together. Korkor is a free spirit, warm and strong. They make a perfect match and have two of the sweetest boys in the world.

If you know anything about the United Kingdom, and specifically Scotland, you know that it is nearly/most likely/usually/universally wet. This day was a wet day too, but it was also cooler than normal and that meant one thing for our hike—ice.

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[18] And like any respectable Scot, enjoys whisky too. To Simon I owe my love of drinking Lagavulin while singing "Loch Lomond" or "Fairytale of New York."

About ten minutes into the hike we hit the ice. And for the next two hours my wife and I took turns walking a few steps before slipping and falling down—often! In fact, my wife swore then to never go on a hike with me again.[19]

Just like mistakes, no one likes falling down. Earlier in this book, I mentioned how humans experience loss two times greater than we experience success. It doesn't help when districts pretend to value learning from failure when, in reality, they treat those who fail with the proverbial "whack!" of a 2 × 4 across their head.

One of the biggest reasons principals leave the profession is that they feel underprepared and overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the principalship, which negatively impacts principal retention (Reid, 2020, p. 3).

But there is a solution.

Researchers widely agree that novice principals benefit from mentor relationships and leadership programs (Sherman, 2005, p. 78). I've mentored both novice and veteran principals for years and because of the relationship we've built, they've continued to work with me for multiple years. Mentorship is an easy way to retain school leaders. Connection is key. Relationships are gold.

Ice, mistakes, and failures are all missed opportunities when it comes to professional development and school districts. Zander and Zander (2002) point out that "mistakes can be like ice. If we resist them, we may keep on slipping in a posture of defeat. If we include mistakes in our definition of performance, we are likely to glide through them and appreciate the beauty of the longer run" (p. 101).

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[19] My wife resumed hiking with me again six months later. By then her aversion to hiking had thawed.

This powerful reframe is an opportunity for all who design professional development. If we truly appreciated mistakes as the mentors they are, then districts could use the 2 × 4s previously earmarked for discipline and reprioritize them for something more useful, like framing a house. A lack of robust mentorship programs that help principals learn from their mistakes is a colossal missed opportunity when it comes to professional development.

Oxygen Masks and Mirror Moments

There is a reason that flight attendants tell their passengers to put their own oxygen mask on before helping anyone around them, including their children, in the case of an emergency. That's because if you don't take care of yourself first—if you don't make sure that you have sufficient oxygen—you're of no use to anyone else, especially when you're dead.

This is hard to do, and hardest for leaders, especially those in education who enter the profession with a servant's heart. This can be a challenge and a missed opportunity because when districts fail to develop their own leaders, it is uncommon for leaders to do this for themselves (Levin et al., 2020, p. vii).

The result is that school administrators would rather invest in the development of their staff than develop themselves. This is the default perspective of most school leaders. If there is a dollar left in the PD budget, that dollar goes to staff members. Can you imagine if businesses operated the same way? I am not arguing that leaders shouldn't take care of their people and provide opportunities for their professional growth. Don't get confused! But that doesn't mean leaders need to be martyrs or starve themselves of development.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the quote "Everyone wins when a leader gets better" changed everything for me. A leader has a moral imperative to make sure that they are getting better. There is a cost to ignoring their own development. In this case, a leader isn't simply standing still. No, while they pass over professional development opportunities, their engaged peers continue to grow. In reality, they are regressing while their peers move forward.

Michael Jordan really started to dominate the NBA when he began to challenge his teammates to improve their game and when he trusted them in key situations. Yet, he did not ignore developing his own skills. I distinctly remember "The shrug" in Game 1 of the 1992 NBA finals, where a formerly mediocre three-point shooter made six three-point shots in the first half alone. Imagine if Michael focused only on his teammates and didn't improve other aspects of his game! That is a ridiculous notion to consider, yet that is the mindset of many school leaders.

One hurdle that leaders must overcome is to choose themselves. To say, "My development is not only important, but necessary to the continued growth of my organization, its staff, and its students." Once a leader makes this mindset shift, they begin to look for opportunities to take their skills to the next level.

Once a leader decides that their development is important and an *unselfish* act, then they must answer an incredibly tough question. I call this the "mirror moment," and to describe it, I'll bring you to a sunny spring day in London.

Eileen was a member of the mastermind for three years before embarking on her dream to sail around the world with her husband. She served as a school leader

in China and often went to teacher recruitment fairs around the world to find the best talent. In the spring of 2019, I met Eileen in London to have lunch and to spend time with her after the recruitment fair. At the time I lived in Glasgow, so it was a short flight. More importantly, meeting mastermind members face-to-face is part of my vision because I value relationship building.

We met for lunch at a Lebanese restaurant, one of her favorite cuisines. After lunch we headed out to Kensington Gardens. Eileen was a native New Yorker and tall, so walking with her throughout the park was like a low-intensity jog. We talked about many issues regarding both life and leadership. When the conversation turned to the mastermind, Eileen shared something I had never heard before. She said, "I had to get past the guilt in order to join the mastermind."

Hearing the word "guilt," I wondered if there was something I had done to make her feel that way. If there was, I needed to correct it. Fortunately, that was not it. The "guilt" that Eileen felt had to do with the cost of mastermind membership. It's not a free experience; it is an investment. What Eileen shared is that she invested plenty of her resources to look the part—she bought nice clothes without a second thought. After all, it's important to "look the part" of an administrator.

The mastermind created a type of tension she had not experienced before. Eileen invested in the mastermind out-of-pocket, and before the mastermind she had never made that kind of investment in her own leadership growth. "It was the best professional decision I ever made," Eileen said to me. "After all, looking the part is one thing, but actually being the part is quite another. Looking back, it seems a little ridiculous. Of course how we present ourselves matters. More important than that is our mindset, our ability to make

decisions, communication, relationship building, and how we handle conflict."

This story taught me the vast missed opportunity that exists in many districts. With hindsight, it seems crazy that leaders hear a message that makes them believe that it's more important to invest in clothes versus professional development that will improve their performance. Looking the part of a leader is one thing; *being a leader* is a different path altogether.

Looking the part of a leader is one thing; being a leader is a different path altogether.

The Role and the Challenge

Another missed opportunity is helping leaders see what the "right stuff" is to get done. One disturbing trend I see in education is the "hustle culture" and wearing "busyness as a badge of honor."

If you are a leader, you can count on being busy. It doesn't make you special, and it certainly doesn't make you productive or help you add the most value to your organization. There's a big difference between getting stuff done and getting the *right* stuff done. Top performers have the ability to focus and put their energy and resources in doing the right stuff.[20]

I fear that as an industry we are building ineffective leaders who will either remain in the profession and continue to be ineffective or burn out and leave the profession entirely. Both scenarios are unacceptable.

My mentor, Aaron Walker, has challenged me countless times to be an inch wide and a mile deep.

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[20] Two resources I'll suggest on focus and doing the right stuff would be Gary Keller's *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* and Cal Newport's *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World.*

Unfortunately, education takes a different approach, producing leaders who are, instead, a mile wide and an inch deep. School leaders are overloaded with responsibility, which interferes with their ability to be a specialist.

Leading a school is incredibly hard work. At times it may even feel like not only are the odds against you, but maybe even fortune and the universe are working behind your back and against you too. It's easy to understand why. In the era of globalization, education reform and the diverse needs of teachers, parents, and other stake-holders are all factors that contribute to the increasingly complex role of the principal (Ng & Szeto, 2016).

There is actually an acronym for this experience that principals know all too well: VUCA, or volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—also known as *the role of a school leader!*

But not only are school administrators operating in a VUCA world; they are also overloaded with responsibility. Marzano et al. (2005) identify 21 responsibilities considered essential for principal effectiveness (as quoted in Ng & Szeto, 2016, p. 542).

An increasing list of responsibilities and leading within a VUCA environment are increasing the alienation, isolation, stress, and frustration experienced by principals, which then lead to disengagement and flight from the principalship (Ng & Szeto, 2016).

Not only that, but the role of principal is also moving away from traditional planning, organizing, and leading to one of caring and support (van der Vyver et al., 2014, p. 61).

School leaders have a difficult job indeed. But it becomes easier when leaders learn to focus on the *right* stuff

and ignore the rest. If everything is a priority, nothing is. One path to higher performance is actually doing more of less. Other industries know this. It may even be considered common sense, but it certainly isn't common practice, which is why this is a massive missed opportunity in professional development offered to school leaders.

Missed Targets and Outgrowing Your Home

When principals in your district get assigned a mentor or coach, what kind of principal comes to mind first?

It's the principal who is struggling—maybe he or she is even on a performance plan. High performers are usually left alone. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," is the common thought. But that kind of thinking creates a ceiling for performance. Here, good principals never become great, and great principals never become excellent.

T.J. Vari, an assistant superintendent, told me he enrolled one of his district's most talented principals to the mastermind because he had outgrown what the district offered. T.J. has seen the results from this investment as well. The principal he enrolled in the mastermind, Nick,[21] comes back to the district fired up from what he's learning in the mastermind and brings that energy and thinking to the district. He shares what we are doing and what he's learning with his peers. Because T.J. invested in a top performer, all principals are challenged and growing within the district.

In the past when I interviewed for leadership jobs, I loved to ask how a district supported its principals. What I found is that most districts spoke in

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[21] Nick's case study is available at the end of Chapter 5.

generalities that indicated there wasn't a real plan for nurturing talent within the organization. My experience was that few districts actually provide a robust system of support for high-achieving principals. This thought was confirmed when interviewing Kirsten Reichert and Jeff Ikler on the *Better Leaders Better Schools* podcast.[22] They told me that it's common for districts to talk about leadership development, but when you dig into the actions, you see a misalignment of vision and implementation. John Doerr (2018) says, "Ideas are easy. Execution is everything" (p. 6). Watch what people do rather than what they say. Talk is cheap. Action tells you everything you need to know.

It's also important to note the value of bringing in an outside organization to mentor principals. This helps avoid such pitfalls as central office leaders acting as gatekeepers; discrimination based on sex and race; and internal groups acting as an echo chamber, preserving the status quo, and slowing down growth and innovation (Sherman, 2005, p. 710).

If district leaders ignore the development of their top talent because they think, "If it ain't broke don't fix it," this is a disservice to their top talent. They are causing friction in these leaders' development by accident. This happens in the classroom as well, where poorly performing students are given more attention and intervention, while the top-performing students are left on their own, usually bored out of their minds. What a missed opportunity!

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[22] Kirsten and Jeff appeared on Season 2 Episode 6. The podcast is titled "Shifting: How School Leaders Can Create a Culture of Change," which is also the name of a great book they wrote also published by Corwin.

Leaders cannot grow when receiving inauthentic professional development, when they operate in isolation, or when they experience missed opportunities. Since 2016, we've been testing our ideas at Better Leaders Better Schools. Now it's time to share why what we do works and serve more leaders at scale. I call our approach the ABCs of powerful professional development™. Leaders thrive in our community because of the authenticity, belonging, and challenge they experience. And I believe it will revolutionize how leaders are supported around the world.

In Chapter 2, I'll briefly introduce the model, share some general data that represent our community, and talk about the kind of leaders we serve. Then, in Part II, we will dive deeply into each component of the model. Part of my hope is to get you excited about what we offer. I also hope that it inspires you to create and search out professional development that expresses the ABCs of powerful professional development™ in order for you to grow as a leader.

Mastermind Case Study

Demetrius Ball

Principal at Iron Horse Middle School

"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . ."

–Rudyard Kipling, "If"

Tell us what you do and what your work typically entails.

I am a middle school principal who supports 46 certificated teachers, 23 classified staff members, and 1,045 students on a daily basis. I am responsible for helping develop our school vision and a community

that supports liberty and justice for all, which leads to us meeting our school mission.

How has the mastermind helped you?

The mastermind has helped me develop into a competent and confident school leader. Actually, I probably would not be a building principal if it were not for being a member of the mastermind. I learned almost seven years ago (2014), as a classroom teacher working toward my administrative credential, that I could not wait for my school or district to prepare me to be an educational leader. That year I discovered what it meant to be a "connected educator" when I was introduced to EduTwitter. In 2015 I discovered Better Leaders Better Schools, and I actually think I reached out to Danny at the end of that year because his message resonated with me. When I found out about the mastermind, I was a bit hesitant because, like everyone else, my time was limited, but being a member of the mastermind has been time well invested. I have learned so many leadership lessons simply by studying our books, but the discussions and problem solving we do together gave me the confidence to apply for and acquire my first principal position.

What's the best part of the mastermind?

The best part of the mastermind is the "Hot Seat." The intro engagement activities that each member shares at the beginning of each meeting are invaluable. I take them and use them in every one of my staff meetings. The books and subsequent discussions are valuable as well by helping me understand leadership overall and school leadership specifically. Each of those components is top level, but the Hot Seat is the most valuable. Getting to hear about the challenges that school leaders from around the world are currently facing, and then being able to brainstorm through those situations is invaluable to my effectiveness as a school leader. We talk about personnel opportunities, career progressions, student and family concerns, establishing and eliminating systems, maintaining a balanced life, and

(*Continued*)

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so many other practical experiences. The community that we build in the mastermind allows for every topic to be on the table for discussion.

What is one way the mastermind has helped you approach leadership differently?

The mastermind pushes me to see things from multiple perspectives. When we talk about topics, it is great to hear the thoughts of leaders who may take a completely different approach to solving a problem than me.

What advice would you give a leader considering joining the mastermind?

I will always give leaders considering joining the mastermind the same advice: This will be one of the best, if not the best, investment that you've ever made in yourself. Not only are we a professional development group, but most importantly, we're a family.

Chapter 1 Reflection Questions

How often are you participating in professional development that grows you?

Think about how your district is developing you. Are you satisfied with that experience? If your needs are being met, what is the district doing that you value? If your needs are not being met, make a plan to take your development into your own hands.

How isolated are you as a leader? What needs to change? What are you willing to do to connect with a network of leaders who will support your development?

Are you bringing your full self to work? To what extent are you able to ignore being the leader you *think* others want you to be, in order to be your authentic leadership self?