

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

To thoroughly define “leading from below the surface,” it is necessary to review the existing leadership theory in order to place this concept in perspective. This review is presented in Chapter 2. The theoretical/conceptual framework that is the primary focus of this book is shaped by the review and is provided at the end of that chapter. This leading-from-below-the-surface framework serves as a “connect” and ties the chapters together, keeping the attention on principal leadership skills in school practice. In Chapter 3, I then give my readers more detail and explanation of exactly what I mean by leading from below the surface.

Let me first provide a brief overview and specific definition of leading from below the surface.

FIRST, WHAT IS THE SURFACE?

I suggest that for the most part, *surface* is synonymous with the obvious or clearly visible. As we attempt to positively impact teaching and learning, we see teachers delivering instruction in some pretty clear ways: direct instruction, collaborative learning groups, individual learning centers, use of technology to enhance learning, etc. And we spend most of our time observing this teaching in formal classroom situations. We are guided by clear goals and specific objectives, and we evaluate teachers systematically. Much learning takes place in

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these traditional classrooms. But to get below the surface, we must expand our thinking beyond the obvious and visible.

Looking at students and evidence of effective learning, we again focus on the more visible and obvious: test scores, attendance data, discipline referrals, and report card grades. Here lies an inherent danger of staying on or above the surface: We have a tendency to highlight the average and above-average students, missing some of the students who might be considered at risk of educational failure. The real attributes and successes of some students are not clearly revealed by test scores and report card grades. Again, we must look deeper to get at the complete meaning of effective learning.

To further identify the surface, let's visit our friends Bolman and Deal (1984). As you may know, they suggest four frames as approaches to better understand and manage organizations: (a) structural frame, (b) human resource frame, (c) political frame, and (d) symbolic frame. My below-the-surface model can be better understood if we think of the first two frames representing the surface, and the last two frames helping us to lead from below the surface.

Think for a moment about the first two frames: structural and human resource. If we look closely, we find that these two frames occur on the surface, or as Bolman and Deal (1984) explain, "the structural and human resource frames attend primarily to formal structure" (p. 235) and "represent the obvious sides of schools" (p. 234). The structural frame emphasizes the importance of structure: rules, policies, objectives, and management kinds of activities. The human resource frame involves the needs, feelings, and prejudices of teachers, students, and administrators in our schools. The often-repeated theme of *principal as instructional leader* is heavily emphasized by structural ideas, and centers on the structural and human resource frames. To better define my concept of leading from below the surface, let me highlight a portion of their discussion of these two frames:

It is not that either of these perspectives is wrong; they are both quite useful in explaining how schools work or in developing policies and strategies for helping them to improve. The main problem is that each leaves something

out; that together they do not highlight significant features of schools as organizations. To capture the *hidden sides of schools*, we need to entertain other *less obvious* perspectives. (p. 235; emphasis mine)

It is these hidden sides of schools that I suggest we travel to in leading from below the surface.

OK, NOW WHAT DOES “BELOW THE SURFACE” MEAN?

Let’s start with an example. In a recent program evaluation for the Klein Independent School District in Houston, Texas, I was asked to investigate the number of graduating seniors taking advanced math courses. When looking at the existing data, I noticed that 72% of the students graduating from the district’s three high schools completed advanced math courses (Pre-Algebra, Algebra 1 and 2, Geometry, Trigonometry, Statistics, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus) during their high school career. The superintendent and board were very proud of this figure. But to the superintendent’s credit, he requested that I look into the situation further. We both agreed that sometimes looking at a single statistic does not present the whole story or paint the complete picture.

Obviously, we wanted to look at issues of gender, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic level. But more important, I wanted to investigate the completion rates as they corresponded to each of the individual math courses. Specifically, I wanted to report the highest math course that students completed. Something very interesting and significant *surfaced*. My findings are shown below.

We’re sure glad we did not stop at the first data report, revealing a 72% completion rate. Sure enough, it is accurate, but as you see, it does not really complete the picture. This second bit of information suggested that the district needed to attend to some specific courses and specific groups of students.

In the process of our literature review, we uncovered the results of a similar study completed by the U.S. Department of

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Table 1.1 Percent of Graduating Seniors by Highest Mathematics Course at Klein High School

<i>Highest Math Course Completed</i>	<i>% Seniors Completing</i>
Pre-Algebra	9%
Algebra 1	13%
Algebra 2	27%
Geometry	18%
Trigonometry	22%
Pre-Calculus	11%
Calculus	7%
Statistics	9%

Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, in 1995, representing graduating seniors across the nation. This information, shown in Table 1.2, was helpful in showing the Klein School District that there was nothing terribly wrong with their seemingly low figures. They were very close to the national figures. Though this was somewhat comforting to them, the superintendent still found his figures unacceptable and began to look at strategies for increasing the completion rates in Pre-Algebra, Algebra 1, and Algebra 2. His rationale was to improve the base courses in hopes that improvement would naturally occur in the more advanced courses.

We hear much these days about data-based decision making. I suggest we use different terminology to describe how principals lead from below the surface: *evidence-based decision making*. Many times (as in my example above) it is not enough to look just at the clear and obvious data. The data revealed a 72% completion rate, but looking at the *evidence* requires a broader and deeper (below the surface) investigation. The individual math course completion rate was much more meaningful and truly represented what was happening at Klein's three high schools.

As our visit with Bolman and Deal helped us with understanding the *surface*, they can also help us better understand *below the surface*. Let's go back to their four frames and focus on the last two: (a) political and (b) symbolic. In their discussion of

Table 1.2 Percent of Graduating Seniors by Highest Mathematics Course Completed in High School

<i>Highest Math Course Completed</i>	<i>% of Seniors Completing</i>
Less than Pre-Algebra	8%
Pre-Algebra	6%
Algebra 1	11%
Algebra 2	31%
Geometry	14%
Other advanced math*	21%
Calculus	9%

* Includes Algebra 3, Trigonometry, Pre-Calculus, and Probability and Statistics

SOURCE: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (1995).

the *hidden sides of schools*, they state that political and symbolic theories look at schools quite differently. Rather than advocating rational control exercised through authority, a political view concentrates on a negotiated order achieved through the exercise of power among groups and coalitions (Peterson & Wimpleberg, 1983). From a symbolic perspective (rituals, ceremonies, stories, gossip), the elements of culture form the glue that holds an organization together (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

Some organizations have tangible products, allowing leaders to focus mostly on Bolman and Deal's structural and human resource frames. But schools are much more complex, with effective teaching and student learning representing more intangible products. Because of this complexity, school leaders must spend considerable time "hanging out" below the surface.

In a sense, leading from below the surface involves two significant dimensions: (1) expanding your decision making beyond the formal and obvious places (i.e., classrooms) and (2) moving from data-based decision making to a deeper perspective utilizing evidence-based decision making. Effective principals are those who focus time and attention on each of these two areas. They realize that very few significant decisions are made in the principal's office or in meetings with the superintendent or board.

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Effective principals make decisions in hallways with teachers, on school buses with children, in kitchens with cafeteria workers, on the ball field with coaches, and at the Tuesday evening Lion's Club meeting. Though these places are very visible and on the surface in their own right, the principal's presence there is *below the surface* in regard to where traditional leadership preparation suggests leadership takes place.

Let me finish this chapter with another example to help us understand leading from below the surface. Let's return to the Westside School District in California, but when I was serving as superintendent of the district. We received word from the State Department of Education that our application for building-restructuring monies had been approved. This meant that finally we would have the monies to refurbish our classrooms with state-of-the-art technology, new air conditioners (to replace our trusty old "swamp coolers"), fix the leaks with new roofs, put in new bathrooms, and meet all the rest of our construction needs. As you probably know, the superintendent of a small rural district is designated as the *owner* of a building construction or reconstruction project, monitoring architects, contractors, bids, change orders, and building inspectors. This role is all-consuming, requiring early morning meetings with architects and contractors, and after-hours meetings with board members.

In a very real sense, all of one's time in this situation takes place in Bolman and Deal's *structural* and *human resource* frames, and consists of the very obvious: working with established plans and procedures, interpreting contracts, inspecting completed work, staying on budget, and so on. I think you can begin to sense the difficulty that was lying ahead for me.

I found myself spending less and less time conferring with teachers and students. Busy with the reconstruction project, I began to neglect the more invisible and intangible aspects of leading the district. Often, I would have to designate classroom observations and the handling of staff meetings to the principal. Obviously, this was a great opportunity for the principal, as he became more and more responsible for instructional leadership. But for me, it meant not paying attention to the *political* and *symbolic* frames (below the surface).

The trouble ahead for me included (1) frustrated teachers who felt ignored and unsupported, (2) disappointed community members who missed the regular communication and contact with their superintendent, and (3) puzzled education officials who noticed my increased absence from county and state meetings and workshops. Needless to say, I discovered myself to be in a potentially dangerous situation. Superintendents can wake up any morning and (through no fault of their own) find that any of the three stakeholders mentioned above feel ignored, alienated, or left out of the decision-making process. Fortunately, for whatever reason, I was able to shift focus and get myself back to the *below-the-surface* issues. Part of the solution was to pull my principal into some of the decisions and meetings required with the reconstruction responsibilities. In addition, I solicited and invited more participation and involvement from individual board members with these duties, allowing me to return to some of the more invisible and intangible matters.

LEADERSHIP IS BOTH OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE

A final suggestion to help us with the understanding of leading from below the surface is to look at the objective and subjective sides involved. We generally overemphasize the objective aspect of leadership: facts, data, and test scores. At the same time, leadership *is* subjective, in that it involves the feelings, beliefs, and values of others. The objective components of *on the surface* are, as stated earlier, visible and tangible. Charged with monitoring the building reconstruction, I rarely thought about anything but the visible and tangible: building plans, contracts, inspection codes, and all the other formal aspects of building construction. If we think for a moment of the dichotomy of leadership and management, I posit that I was doing a pretty good job of managing. But what about leading?

Leading from *below the surface* requires a principal or superintendent to address the subjective components of leadership: the more invisible and intangible things such as teachers' attitudes and beliefs, community members'

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feelings, and state and county educators' perceptions. Not until I returned to *below the surface* did I get back to the real essence of leading a school district.

In closing this chapter, allow me to suggest that leading from below the surface can be likened to an iceberg: Only 10% of the iceberg is seen above the surface of the water. It is the 90% of the iceberg that is hidden below the surface that most concerns the ship's captain who navigates the water. Like an iceberg, the most meaningful (and potentially dangerous, as I found out as superintendent during reconstruction) is the invisible or subjective part that is continually operating at the unconscious level, the part that shapes people's beliefs and perceptions (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003). It is this aspect of leadership that can be the most troublesome and potentially dangerous, and that requires the most attention and emphasis in effectively leading schools.