

# What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

“The daily decisions of school leaders are shaped by a set of personal and professional ethics that influence every interaction we have with students, colleagues, and families. Toni Faddis provides clear and coherent guidelines for helping leaders locate and adhere to a set of ethical standards, and interrogate one’s own biases. The outcome is an assurance that all decisions, large and small, are grounded in an ethical frame.”

**Nancy Frey**

San Diego State University

Author of *Developing Assessment-Capable Learners*, *Visible Learning for Literacy*,  
and many other Corwin books

“An innovative and thoughtful approach to addressing real-life ethical concerns of educational practitioners. With its 10 leadership strategies, *The Ethical Line* is a must-read for all educators. Kudos to Dr. Faddis for this important contribution to the field.”

**Jacqueline Stefkovich, JD**

Professor Emerita, The Pennsylvania State University

Author of *Multiple Ethical Paradigms*

“Dr. Faddis skillfully captures the very essence of what leaders at all levels of the organization must do to solve complex issues in which there are no easy solutions. In a time where integrity and ethical leadership is paramount when faced with solving tough issues, Dr. Faddis provides hope and proven strategies to keep leaders from crossing the ethical line.”

**David Lorden**

Former District Superintendent

“I have come to know and rely on Toni Faddis as an effective equity-driven school leader. I have every confidence that those who read this book will come to the same conclusion. More importantly, the book presents 10 ethically driven strategies to help us become the school leaders that our children, families, educators, and communities deserve.”

**Ian Pumpian**

Professor of Educational Leadership, San Diego State University

Author of *How to Create a Culture of Achievement in Your School and Classroom*  
and *Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners*



# KNOW THYSELF

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**F**rom college deans to middle school principals to preschool directors, school administrators are responsible for instructional, financial, and equitable leadership while ensuring the steady day-to-day operational management of our educational organizations. What guides your decisions as a leader? Chances are your decisions are guided by a combination of your personal code of ethics, family values, prior experience, and the policies and laws governing your profession, your district, and your school. All of these factors go into forming and defining your Ethical Line.

### Reflective Questions

- Has there been a time in your career when you felt conflicted because your personal values clashed with the professional norms of your school or district? How did you handle the dilemma of adhering to your own Ethical Line vs. following the norms and regulations of your organization?
- How did you feel after having moved ahead with your decision?
- Have there been times when you have actively challenged a rule because you believed it was flawed? What happened as a result?
- When might you take such a risk?
- What are you willing to stand up for?
- If you decide to take a stand, how do you judge whether or not you're right?

Without careful self-examination and reflection about personal values and beliefs, leaders run the risk of making a questionable decision that puts them and the organization in professional peril. This chapter begins with the self. Here you will find two strategies to help you access your options when moral dilemmas arise. Strategy #1 will help you identify and reflect on your core values and leadership style. Strategy #2 offers specific ways to unpack the uncomfortable emotions that accompany problems, learn from them, and move on. Consciously leading with your core values and eliminating unnecessary mental chatter will bolster your resolve, facilitating your ability to lead ethically and confidently.

## STRATEGY #1: IDENTIFY AND MODEL YOUR CORE VALUES

### THE NEW NORMAL

The role of the school principal has changed dramatically in recent years (Hull, 2018). Whereas in previous eras the principal was responsible for building administration and operational duties, today's principals are expected to be instructional leaders, culture builders, and data analysts who guide school improvement efforts as well as manage building

operations (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Student achievement data, once difficult for citizens to locate, is now easily found with a quick Internet search. As a result, the public is more involved in school functions, has more informed opinions, and has greater expectations of the school system and principals.

When you think of a principal from your own personal school experience, what images come to mind? Some people cite that the principal was a disciplinarian who ruled an iron fist. Others clearly remember the use of corporal punishment by their principal while others say they only remember the principal because his or her picture appeared on the class composite from the local photography company. Though we have different memories of that person, most of us will agree that it seemed like the principal was a permanent fixture at the school, often serving 10 to 20 years in the same office. Nowadays, the notion that the principal is permanent no longer holds true. Results from the 2016–2017 school year indicate that nearly 20% of public school principals changed schools or left the profession. These statistics have remained constant since 2008 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018c).

Principals face more scrutiny from the public than ever before. Society is concerned with the state of public education and how well our students perform in math when compared to students in other countries. The community wants to know how money is allocated to different programs and if their kid will go to Sea World this year. Parent involvement used to mean supporting school activities through bake sales. The National Education Association (NEA) reports that many states now require that education policy includes parents as decision makers in matters of school business. People are more actively involved in their children's education than ever before (NEA, 2012).

Under the watchful eyes of the public, principals are also confronted by changing demographics in their schools. Increasing diversity, including racial, ethnic, linguistic, LGBTQ groups, and growing numbers of students with disabilities, have surfaced new challenges in school settings. Principals are tasked with ensuring the wide range of academic, emotional, and social needs of students are being met. Peter DeWitt's (2017) top 10 list of critical issues that principals face on a daily basis includes the school-to-prison pipeline, student learning, social media, and the effects of poverty. A 2012 survey by MetLife indicated that

principals feel their job responsibilities are remarkably different from just five years before, and 75% of those reported that their jobs are too complex and have led to higher degrees of stress and decreased job satisfaction (MetLife, 2012). Changing expectations, coupled with inadequate training and support, have led many principals to conclude that their jobs are no longer sustainable (Alvoid & Black, 2014).

Ten years ago, social media was not a *thing*. Today it is a *thing* and we are acutely aware of public posts to Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms. We are concerned that students use social media and instant messaging to communicate rapidly with their peers. We are worried about their quick access to cameras and video recorders. We are distressed that students are able to circulate inappropriate pictures and are quick to press the record button to film themselves and others. While technology has certainly played a positive role in transforming education, other aspects have led to disastrous consequences for the victims of slander, bullying, and other character smears. Each of these issues represent ethical challenges for principals.

Principals also grapple with local, state, and national policies that may be at odds with each other (Hull, 2018). For example, in recent years there has been a shift in some communities toward a restorative approach instead of punishment when a student misbehaves. The Obama administration was concerned with disparate suspension rates between African American students and other groups, taking steps to rectify unfair disciplinary practices. The Trump administration is taking a different approach, disregarding restorative practices but providing guidelines for schools who choose to arm their teachers (Meckler, 2018). Principals who choose to take the restorative approach find themselves needing to justify their decisions to parents who demand punishment for the perpetrator when their child is the victim or teachers who insist stringent consequences and high standards are in the best interest of the students.

Because of the evolving and complex nature of the job, being a school principal is no easy feat. The leadership terrain is often muddled by obstructions and hurdles that may require us to think fast, reevaluate, and make necessary pivots. Plans fail, people move, and there seems to be never-ending budget cuts that require leaders to stretch dollars further and further.

While principals from previous eras had power to rule unilaterally from their offices, today’s leaders are expected to work collaboratively, involving others in decision making. They are facilitators who help others to understand policy and context while ensuring discussions are inclusive. A chief role of the principal is to assist groups of people with divergent interests to come to a consensus in service of student learning. Today’s principals are unable to rely on a one-size-fits-all method that may have worked with a past generation; instead, they must be innovative problem solvers.

Further, solving problems is unlike previous eras when the principal could impose a decision or rule without rebuke. Today’s principals must consider how local and national policies might impact a wide range of diverse community members, who may have their own competing interests (see Figure 1.1). These problems, some of which feel unsurmountable, combined with a nonstop pace have resulted in high

**Figure 1.1 Characteristics of Public Schools: Then and Now**

<b>The Previous Generation</b>	<b>Today’s Realities</b>
Education as a profession was steady.	The principal hand delivers lay-off notices to teachers each year.
Principals managed school operations.	Principals manage school operations and are the instructional leaders on campus.
Principals suspended the rowdy kids.	Principals respect the rights of students and do not deny education because of poor behavioral choices. Principals coax, entice, and reward children for being in class.
Parents respected school personnel and supported their decisions.	Parents insist that their children are “innocent” and would “never lie.” Principals must bear the burden of proof to parents.
Students ate breakfast at home before school.	Seventy percent of students in U.S. public schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.  (NCES, 2018b)

levels of principal turnover, especially in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013).

Our understanding of ourselves and our profession should continue to deepen and grow throughout our lifetimes. Successful leaders keep up to date by continually reading and discussing emerging educational research as well as by staying current with what's in the news. Regular attendance at workshops and conferences are opportunities to learn, build networks, and grow content knowledge. By taking advantage of these learning opportunities, you will extend your understanding of educational practices, are more likely to anticipate potential barriers that may pop up, and are better equipped to make sense of sensitive situations that arise at your school site.

Today's realities in schools necessitate that principals are prepared to have conversations with students, staff, and parents that were unlikely only a few years ago. Current topics such as gender-neutral bathrooms, transgender teens who play on boys' and girls' sports teams, and beliefs

"Because ethical dilemmas are so value laden, it is essential that school leaders understand their own values and value positions" (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2014, p. 240).

about prayers during the school day are often highly sensitive and may result in ethical dilemmas because of people's views. "Because ethical dilemmas are so value laden, it is essential that school leaders understand their

own values and value positions" (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2014, p. 240). As such, we must be able to articulate, and defend if necessary, what we truly stand for.

Commitment to our ideals is what makes us ethical leaders. This unwavering devotion establishes a reputation as a leader, parent, community member, or employee. It is a conscious effort to be explicit about what you believe in and what you're not willing to let go. Consistently leading with our core values is one way to earn respect from others in the organization and school community. People take cues from the ways in which the leader behaves. As people get to know you, they come to expect how you will respond in given situations.

Strategies, goals, and missions may change; however, values are your core and remain intact despite new conditions, new laws, and new goals (Starr, 2016). Certainly, there are open and shut cases that do not require strategic thinking and careful analysis of solutions. Some issues can be handled by adhering to a policy or maintaining a child-centered approach. Often, we are able to resolve these “no brainers” because we have a firm understanding and devotion to our core values. So, what do you believe in? Why do you feel that way? How do your beliefs influence your actions?

## ACTIVITY 1.1

### Identify Your Core Values

As a leader, it is important that you be able to succinctly articulate your leadership values, such that you are able to speak of them easily, infuse them into professional conversations, and lead based upon that awareness. A manager of an environmentally focused nonprofit may identify her core values as the environment, service, and creativity. A police officer may state that security, control, and integrity are the backbone of his work. It is important to be conscious of what our own personal values (see Figure 1.2) are so that we can evaluate whether the decisions we make match up to the values we have articulated.

#### Step 1. Reflect

Consider the values listed on the next page in relation to your career, not your personal life.

#### Step 2. Identify

Circle five values that you consider to be cornerstones of your leadership. Which values elicit strong feelings within you? Which can you not imagine leading without? Choose five, or feel free to include additional values that are not listed in Figure 1.2

*(Continued)*



(Continued)

**Figure 1.2 List of Core Values**

Achievement	Fairness	Loyalty
Adventure	Family	Morality
Affection	Flexibility	Order
Awareness	Freedom	Power
Balance	Friendship	Predictability
Challenge	Happiness	Recognition
Collaboration	Hard Work	Reliability
Comfort	Harmony	Respect
Communication	Helpfulness	Responsibility
Compliance	Honesty	Responsiveness
Control	Improvement	Risk
Cooperation	Inclusiveness	Security
Courage	Independence	Self-respect
Creativity	Initiative	Service
Culture	Innovation	Success
Curiosity	Integrity	Support
Directness	Involvement	Tradition
Diversity	Justice	Transparency
Environment	Kindness	Trust
Equity	Learning	Truthfulness
Excellence	Likeability	Valor
Expertise		Variety
		Wisdom

**Step 3. Focus**

Now that you have identified five values, cross two of them off. This might be challenging, but it's important to truly identify the essence of your leadership. Once you have identified the top three core values that are most important to you, take notice of why these three stood out to you. There is often a reason, story, or a belief that deeply resonates with you. Use the lines below to record your top three core values and the reasons behind them.

Core Value #1: \_\_\_\_\_ Underlying reason: \_\_\_\_\_

Core Value #2: \_\_\_\_\_ Underlying reason: \_\_\_\_\_

Core Value #3: \_\_\_\_\_ Underlying reason: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Step 4. Communicate

Our beliefs drive our actions. As leaders, it is important to communicate our core values to the community we serve so that they know what we stand for and how decisions have been approached and informed. Now that you have identified your three core values, how might you reference them during discussions, presentations, meetings, e-mails, newsletters, or other communications? When you are transparent with your values and consistently communicate them verbally and nonverbally, people take notice of your character and what you believe in. Abiding by your core values also helps you stay true to yourself. The ability to name your core values, as well as lead in service of them, builds your credibility as a leader in your community.

## YOUR ETHICAL LINE

Strategy #1: *Identify and Model Your Core Values* is the first step in understanding, defining, and acknowledging your Ethical Line. Think of your Ethical Line as your moral compass; it is that voice in your head that guides your thoughts and actions; it steers you toward your true north. Our Ethical Line is influenced by our values, temperaments, and our personal experiences.

Think of your Ethical Line as your moral compass; it is that voice in your head that guides your thoughts and actions; it steers you toward your true north.

To become familiar with your Ethical Line, you might consider

- reflecting on your own micro-ethics: specific behaviors during your interpersonal interactions each day;
- articulating your core beliefs;
- investigating the shared values of your organization; and
- making sense of the relationship between your Ethical Line and the values of your organization.

Our Ethical Line is not fixed; contextual factors influence our decision paths. Throughout a career, our Ethical Lines continue to mold and adjust according to our surroundings, changing priorities, and new information. It is also shaped by the different leaders we encounter, local and state accountability measures, our school communities, and the values of our organization. As you do your due diligence keeping up to date with your profession and the changing times, you will find moments when you are called upon to reevaluate your Ethical Line.

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### RIGHT VS. RIGHT SITUATIONS

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We all face tough decisions. We may find ourselves worrying endlessly over possible outcomes or agonizing about which course of action to take. The root cause of worry and anxiety during the decision-making process is the little voice inside your head that reminds you of your core values. Just as our values vary from those of our colleagues, so too might our personal values conflict within ourselves. Have you ever had this feeling, when one of your values conflicts with another because of the situation at hand? You can see both sides, and you have a hard time choosing. In situations like these, we might feel like we're in the impossible position of choosing between two conflicting "rights."

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### THE CASE OF RIGHT VS. RIGHT

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Principal Stone  
Elementary School  
North Carolina

An example of a right vs. right situation occurred to an elementary principal (we'll call him George Stone). Principal Stone was informed that a parent was continually violating the kindergarten student drop-off policy. The policy requires a parent to physically walk the child to class each morning, ensuring that the 5-year-old child is never out of sight of the parent or the teacher. Upon investigation, Principal Stone learned that a parent, Ms. Montes, was unable to walk her child, Ramon, to class each morning because her work schedule had recently changed. Since she was required to get to work earlier than before, she had recruited her fifth-grade son, Javier, to walk Ramon to class. Ms. Montes understood

and appreciated the policy designed to keep children safe, but she felt her older son was capable of walking Ramon to class. This became a problem when other parents started complaining that they didn't want to be inconvenienced by finding a parking spot to walk their children to class if Ms. Montes didn't have to. Principal Stone understood Ms. Montes' work predicament and wanted to be helpful, but now that other parents were disregarding the policy he began to worry for the children's safety.

**Dilemma:** Principal Stone is a reasonable person who cares deeply about the welfare of his students; his dilemma is that he is unable to generate a satisfactory compromise.

**Reflection:** What should Principal Stone do? What would you do?

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In one recent study of aspiring principals' preparation programs, it was revealed that there is a general lack of formal ethical training in the field of education (Greer, Searby, & Thoma, 2015). Without substantial preparation and training in ethical reasoning, educators are left to struggle with these challenges on their own. These challenges compel us to think very carefully about our own values and moral principles as well as those individuals who are affected by the situation. Many principals wrestle over the decisions that they make, knowing that there can be more than one right answer; sometimes decisions do not have a right vs. wrong option. What might be the "right" solution to one person (Ms. Montes) may not work for others (other frustrated parents).

In the case of Principal Stone, he is caught between two right decisions. From one point of view, he understands Ms. Montes' need to have her older child walk her 5-year-old to class so she can get to work on time. From another point of view, he is committed to student safety by enforcing the school policy of parents personally handing off kindergartners to their teachers. What Principal Stone decides may set a precedent, or it may not. Either way, Principal Stone must be prepared to justify his decision to community members.

Like Principal Stone, as you consider all aspects of a dilemma, it is likely that you will see more than one "right" way to respond. Figure 1.3 presents real-life dilemmas that require you to consider your Ethical Line, teachable moments, and possible decisions. Ultimately, you have to make a choice that could have serious repercussions to children and families. Will you be able to live with your choice?

Figure 1.3 Examples of Dilemmas

Dilemma	Ethical Line	Options
<p><b>Example 1</b></p> <p>Jayden, a 6-year-old, brings a butter knife to school to spread the peanut butter to the edges of the bread on his sandwich because that's what he does at home.</p> <p>There is a "no weapons" policy at the school. There is no stipulation for age or other factors.</p>	<p>Your conscience tells you that there are different approaches you might take when attending to this situation.</p> <p>On the one hand, you take into consideration the importance of implementing the school rule fairly to all students without showing favoritism.</p> <p>On the other hand, you recognize that this was an innocent mistake, no harm was intended or done, and the student (and students) would benefit more from this being a teachable moment rather than an automatic enforcement of the rule regardless of the circumstances.</p>	<p><b>Options</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You suspend Jayden in accordance to the policy.</li> <li>2. You do not suspend Jayden. His age and intent are considered. You decide this is a teachable moment for him. Instead of suspending, you talk to him and explain how he broke the school rule. You explain your rationale for not suspending Jayden to your staff. You also take this opportunity to teach the students in your school about rules, rule-breaking, intent, harm (or lack thereof), and appropriate consequences.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Example 2</b></p> <p>Chloe, a junior in high school, insists on wearing a hoodie during class.</p> <p>There is an established dress code for students that indicates students should remove hats during class.</p> <p>However, the exception to the rule is that students of Muslim faith are allowed to wear hijabs (headwear) as part of their expression of religious freedom.</p> <p>Chloe is not Muslim.</p>	<p>Your conscience tells you that there are different approaches you might take when attending to this situation.</p> <p>On one hand, you need to enforce the school rule and can't make exceptions for students no matter how strongly they dislike the rule.</p> <p>On the other hand, you sympathize with Chloe's insecurities and rather than punishing her, you want to give her the opportunity to problem-solve without breaking the rule.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You inform Chloe of the policy and have her remove the hoodie.</li> <li>2. You find out that Chloe wants to wear the hoodie so badly because she is embarrassed about her hair and is able to concentrate in class if she isn't worried about her appearance. You decide to meet with Chloe privately to discuss options for her so that she is not breaking the rule but is also able to concentrate in class.</li> </ol>

Dilemma	Ethical Line	Options
<p><b>Example 3</b></p> <p>Magdalena is a second grader who is learning about life cycles in science. In addition to readings, Magdalena's teacher also provides instruction to the class about life cycles using Hopper, a rare red-legged frog who is the class pet.</p> <p>Each week a different student is assigned the responsibility of feeding Hopper live crickets. When it is Magdalena's turn, she secretly releases Hopper into the field next to the school playground. Magdalena is a Buddhist and killing animals violates her faith.</p> <p>The teacher learns that Hopper is gone and is furious because Hopper was the class pet and he is too expensive to replace. The teacher demands that you suspend Magdalena for defiance.</p> <p>Magdalena had not shared her religious views with the teacher.</p>	<p>Your conscience tells you that Magdalena shouldn't be suspended because of her age and because of her religious beliefs.</p> <p>On one hand, you wish that Magdalena or her parents had disclosed the family's beliefs,</p> <p>On the other hand, you wish that Magdalena's teacher had been more proactive in learning about each of her students. You wish that the teacher had communicated to parents that students are expected to feed live crickets to a frog, as this could be detrimental to some students regardless of faith.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You suspend Magdalena for defiance; this appeases the teacher and sends a message to other students that they are expected to follow all rules.</li> <li>2. You convene a meeting with Magdalena and her parents to discuss the situation and how Magdalena might make amends to the teacher and her classmates. You work with the teacher to ensure this doesn't happen again by (a) informing parents of students' responsibility of feeding the frog and providing an alternate assignment for those who are unwilling and (b) having a conversation with the teacher about getting to know each of her students and their beliefs, as related to the class, curriculum, and school programs. You remind the teacher that it is her responsibility to create and maintain a safe classroom environment and a 7-year-old likely does not have the mental tools or confidence to initiate this conversation with the teacher.</li> </ol>

## WHEN MORAL COMPASSES FALTER

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While some people make honest mistakes, others are guilty of premeditated dishonesty. Premeditated dishonesty includes situations that may begin as little white lies that grow into deceitful or fraudulent conduct. So, what happens if your moral compass begins to falter? When your Ethical Line becomes so faint or so blurry that you can no longer see it? “Experiments and experience show that people resist leaping from innocence to evil, but they can be lured into it one innocuous step at a time” (Chussil, 2016, p. 3).

Over time, stretching the truth or cutting corners may become habits. Life is full of slippery slopes, but by staying true to our values and commitments, we are more likely to avoid temptations that appear in our path. You might consider creating a list of things you will never do, such as looking the other way or not speaking up when you should. Writing these actions down won’t safeguard you from doing something you might regret later, but it might help you to identify the beginnings of a slippery slope. The following examples, taken from the headlines, illuminate circumstances when educators ignored the slippery slope and violated ethical principles.

### Cheating

One of the most well-known cheating scandals in education occurred in Atlanta in 2011. Teachers, principals, and even the superintendent were charged and found guilty of racketeering, conspiracy, and making false statements. The superintendent was the 2009 National Superintendent of the Year! She, along with hundreds of educators, were party to changing answers on state tests at erasure parties. It was reported that these parties occurred over a 10-year span, 2000–2010 (Franz, 2013) before a state review determined that some cheating had occurred in more than half of the district’s elementary and middle schools (Carter, 2013). Atlanta may be the site of the most well-known cheating case, but similar situations bubbled up in New York City, El Paso, Washington, D.C., and other cities (Darden, 2014).

In 2013, 12 people were sentenced to jail time for their involvement in a cheating ring that involved 36 people in Memphis, Tennessee. The ringleader, a former teacher and assistant principal, orchestrated an elaborate scheme to help people cheat on their teacher-certification tests. Prosecutors reported that the ringleader had doctored driver's licenses and recruited teachers to impersonate others during state-required exams in three states. The ringleader accepted payment from people who wanted teaching credentials and enticed licensed teachers to take the exams using someone else's identification card. As a result, unqualified teachers were teaching students in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee (Branston, 2013).

Attendance fraud occurred in Columbus, Ohio, when school district officials from Columbus and nine other neighboring districts allegedly falsified attendance records to avoid low test scores. In this case, school leaders were accused of deflating the number of students who attended school on certain test-taking days. To avoid certain students from bringing down overall test scores, district officials disenrolled these students and then reenrolled them after the test was over (Bush, 2017).

## **Theft**

In Detroit, a teacher was charged with gambling away thousands of dollars of student money at a local casino. The teacher was responsible for coordinating school events such as camp and homecoming. When money went missing, an audit revealed that the teacher's salary was not nearly as much as she had deposited into the penny slots. Casino receipts were found next to empty envelopes of homecoming money in the teacher's classroom. This is not an isolated incident; the district maintains a fraud hotline for employees, community members, and vendors to make reports (Hall, 2017).

Another case of theft by a school official was reported in Pennsylvania in 2018. A student council advisor confessed to stealing a student's purse and using the teenager's Victoria's Secret gift card. The purse was stolen from the student during her math class. As the story of the theft unfolded, the public also learned that the teacher was the



daughter of the superintendent. In another breach of ethics, the school board had waived its anti-nepotism policy when the daughter was hired (Kellar, 2018).

### **Hurtful Comments**

Poor behavior doesn't have to make the news in order to be unethical and harmful. There are times when our words offend others, even when there is no intention to harm. A conversation where a teacher and a clerical staff member spoke to each other in Spanish illustrates this point. The two employees were engaged in their conversation and didn't notice that the monolingual principal had entered the area. They stopped mid-sentence when the principal barked, "*Stop speaking Spanish! This isn't the swap meet.*" The employees were stunned but apologized to the principal because they understood the principal to be their superior. They didn't want to risk any kind of retaliation in the future, so they stopped using their native tongue and felt devalued by their principal.

Sadly, these hurtful comments continue to be the norm in many places. This interaction between the principal and two staff members demonstrates a traditional mindset of school leadership, one where the principal has the final say. As our society and school communities become more multicultural, a shift toward cultural appreciation and responsiveness is warranted.

### **How Strong Is Your Moral Compass?**

Unquestionably, some people have a stronger moral compass than others. Some might feel more guilt than others. One person may act dishonestly and yet feel no remorse. The next person may dwell in shame after sharing gossip. We are all wired differently.

Pay attention to the voice in your head but be selective. Don't believe everything it tells you. Our consciences vary, just as our personalities do. Some people have loud inner voices that yell at them, while others may not hear more than a whisper. Your conscience may berate you, congratulate you, or provide you with a host of reasons why or why not you might make a certain decision. At times the voice may seem to be on a running loop that you hear over and over.

Sometimes your inner voice is overpowered by outside chatter, including temptations that vie for your attention and prey upon your

mental resources. Your mind is not always your best friend; you cannot trust it 100% of the time. At times our minds play tricks with us, justifying why it's OK to eat the dessert or rationalizing why it's OK to deviate from the better choice. For decisions of significance that will affect several other people, you should seek the opinions of other trusted individuals. Find a trustworthy colleague to act as your sounding board so you can talk out your options, rationales, and the various consequences of each. Be choosy; some people are terrible advisors. Choose someone who has a strong moral compass and the wisdom to view situations from different vantage points. Don't depend on whoever is available or someone who won't really "hear" you and will just placate you with quick responses to move the conversation to the next topic.

In addition to seeking counsel from a trusted colleague, it is important to develop a routine to practice self-reflection on a regular basis. When we reflect in conscious and purposeful ways, we gain additional insight into our experiences and reactions. We are able to consider how our core values furthered a cause or helped a teammate to learn and grow. Through frequent and conscious articulation, our core values become more and more natural to reference during conversations.

In the next section, we will examine the link between reflecting on core values and building mental stamina so that a meditative state is achieved. Critical components of effective and successful school leadership is the ability to lead using your head and your heart.

## STRATEGY #2: BE CURIOSLY INTROSPECTIVE

Staying true to your values and maintaining your Ethical Line is a crucial component to effective leadership. In addition to successfully managing the day-to-day operations of a school, you are also required to serve as the instructional leader. This may feel overwhelming, but these are all critical responsibilities. Your ability to practice reflective leadership and consciously manage your mental state is essential to avoid burnout. Being a principal isn't easy, so it's important to regularly take stock of how you're feeling, both physically and mentally. Establishing systems for support nourish the soul and improve your outlook during moments of uncertainty.

## FIND KINDRED SPIRITS

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A good leader has a support system. Nobody succeeds alone, and good leaders know that being responsive to teachers, staff, and students takes a lot of mental energy. Being present while someone confides in you is important, as people notice if you're only partially engaged or insincere or otherwise too busy for them. A true leader takes time to listen generously to others when they share personal stories. This is critical to their well-being, demonstrates their trust in your leadership, and ultimately contributes to team functioning and a positive school climate. Whether a teacher is venting or wants to unpack a delicate situation, you need to be there fully and that requires a conscious effort to maintain focus on that person's issue. Good leaders recognize that their colleagues, staff, students, and community members need them to listen intently and respond with constructive suggestions when needed. In order to be there for others, we need to make sure that we have a strong support system of our own, nourishing us so that we can be there for others. A support system may involve family members, mentors, colleagues, and others who are trustworthy and understand how to be a source of strength for you.

Since managing the helm of a school is tough work, it's important to find uplifting kindred spirits. Creating networks of kindred spirits inside and outside of your school will provide you with the crucial inspiration and support you need. Kindred spirits will ask thoughtful questions to push your thinking while also serving as your sounding board as you grapple with difficult issues. Kindred spirits don't solve your problems, but instead they provide support that helps you to process difficult decisions and prepare for hard conversations. With just a few sentiments, our kindred spirits are often able to spark new thinking for us, allowing us to discover the answers that already exist in our minds but that we haven't yet accessed. These interactions are both nourishing and productive.

## PRACTICE SELF-CARE

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Sometimes we tell ourselves that "it's just a cold" and to work through it, but we don't take time off of work to rest and recover properly.

Principals aren't provided a substitute, after all. Our work doesn't stop because we're sick or haven't had time to eat during the school day. Although we advise our staff members to take care of themselves, we often don't follow our own advice. While it may be difficult to take a day off, it's often necessary such that we don't allow physical symptoms to lead to cluttered thinking and poor decisions for students, not to mention worsen our own health prognosis by delaying recovery.

Willy Wonka reminds us that “a little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men.” This advice calls to mind the notion that good leaders don't enslave others, and they don't make slaves of themselves, either. They understand that relaxation is not just a luxury but a necessity for renewal and balance. Whether it is a run, a hike in nature, or an hour at the spa, these are tools that provide emotional, physical, and spiritual self-care so that we can take better care of others.

Feeling balanced is an elusive achievement because we may feel on our game today but completely off tomorrow. Finding balance is a never-ending pursuit, but in those moments when we're there—in the zone and feeling calm—a sense of clarity is gained. Being in the zone is an energetic haven where we can slow down, take a breath, and appreciate the small but important things. During these moments, we have an opportunity to observe using all of our senses so that we can become present. Being present helps us to remain calm when life feels like it's going too fast.

Feeling present and balanced also allows us to be more effective at work. Studies show that when people reflect upon their core values, they feel less anxious during stressful experiences. In fact, this type of self-affirmation is effective for lowering stress and cortisol levels when the stakes are high and the pressure is on (Cuddy, 2015).

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## EXPRESS GRATITUDE

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Gino and Grant (2013) assert that while everybody likes to feel appreciated, we don't say “thank you” very often, especially in our workplaces. Fifty percent of people surveyed are likely to acknowledge others who are immediately related, but only 15% of us thank our colleagues. It is startling that 35% of people reported that their managers never say

“thank you.” We may feel gratitude, yet we don’t express it very often. It seems that a gratitude gap exists in our society.

In another study, participants were divided into three different groups and asked to keep track of their blessings, burdens, or ordinary life events. Results indicated that people who recorded things for which they were grateful also engaged in other positive, healthy behaviors such as getting more exercise. Those who counted their blessings also reported sleeping better and fewer physical illnesses than the other two groups (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Practicing gratitude provides physical and psychological effects, as well as deepens connections to others. Researchers assert that you don’t have to write a list of things you’re grateful for each day (“I’m grateful that I didn’t burn dinner” or “I’m grateful that I got a good parking spot this morning”); instead, there is a greater impact when you reflect on blessings that have a bigger scope, such as “I’m grateful that my in-laws provide loving child care for us” or “I’m grateful that I have the right to vote.”

Journaling is another method to organize and clarify your thoughts such that you are able to examine them in deliberate ways. This might be a daily or weekly ritual of writing freely about the day’s events, or you might choose to muse over a quote, prompt, or your core values. The goal is to establish a recovery routine that fosters your ability to be healthy and resilient.

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## BUILD RESILIENCE

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Exhaustion and burnout are the opposite of resilience. Burnout at work leaves you feeling diminished. It hurts. Tasks that were manageable now feel insurmountable. Burned out people are exhausted, overwhelmed, and often cynical (Valcour, 2016). While accomplishments are important, no one is going to award you a “busiest person ever” trophy on your deathbed.

The “key to resilience is trying really hard, then stopping, recovering, and then trying again” (Achor & Gielan, 2016). This conclusion is based on the biological concept of homeostasis. Our brain continually seeks to restore and sustain well-being. When the body is out of balance

from overworking, a vast amount of mental and physical resources is used trying to regain equilibrium before we can move on.

So how do you recover and build resilience? Some might assume that if you take a break from completing tasks like answering e-mails or returning calls, you will naturally recover and be able to pick back up again later. We assume that taking a time-out will give us energy to conquer those tasks, but that's not wholly true. There is a difference between rest and recovery. Taking a time-out does not equal recovering. To build resilience at work, you need both internal and external recovery periods. Internal recovery periods take place during the workday in the form of scheduled or unscheduled short breaks when you're feeling mentally tired. During these moments, you are able to pause by shifting attention to other things. External recovery refers to actions that occur outside of work, such as having downtime or taking a vacation. Just like our bodies need rest after exertion, our brains also need to get adequate rest (Achor & Gielan, 2016).

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### TAKE A COGNITIVE TIME-OUT

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Taking a half hour for a lunch break might feel impossible, but your body needs daily internal recovery periods. A few minutes away from your screen or the activities of the day shifts attention away from work-related issues and increases well-being. Going for a walk or spending a few minutes meditating can have powerful effects on our stress levels, fatigue, and ability to focus (Sianoja, Synek, de Bloom, Korpela, & Kinnunen, 2018).

Joe Burton is the CEO of Whil, a company that provides training for stress resilience and mental well-being. In his interview with Kira Newman (2018), he asserts that average workdays are not mindful. They are full of ongoing distractions, multitasking, and a wide range of changing emotions based upon the texts, e-mails, and calls we receive. He asserts that people often take their inability to focus and “share that as a gift with everyone else, creating this domino effect of constant distraction and interruption and checking devices 50–100 times per day” (Newman, 2018). These interruptions at work, while entertaining at times, may decrease our ability to concentrate on important tasks and hinder our ability to be fully present when a tricky issue arises.

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## PAUSE TO REGROUP

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One tricky situation at a time is difficult enough to handle, and sometimes there are occasions when multiple dilemmas present themselves at once. During these stressful situations, you may be tempted to solve one problem quickly in order to move on to the next one. Resist the urge to make snap decisions unless it's a matter of safety. While it may not feel like it in the moment, the most frequent problems that occur on campuses are not life and death situations. Typically, people want and expect a swift response from you about other important matters, and unless dire, can wait for a few hours. Don't allow pressure to compel you to make a hasty decision that you may later regret. Instead, buy yourself some time to regroup and process before making a determination.

Buying time appropriately and effectively is a skill. A less effective method of buying time is stating that you'll "get back" to them without providing a clear timeline of actions you will take and when follow-up will occur. Explicitly model your attention to each situation by listening attentively, taking notes, asking good questions, and assuring the concerned party that the matter is important to you, so you want to consider information from all angles. Provide three or four specific actions you will take to investigate and ask for the best number to reach them within 24 hours. When people believe that you are sincere, they will usually comply and allow you a reasonable amount of time to investigate.

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## CALM MENTAL CHATTER

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The ability to press the pause button allows you to take a step back and calmly investigate or devise a useful plan that leads to a "win-win" situation for everybody. It's more difficult to focus when you feel rushed or feel highly emotional because of an event. Having a plan to calm your mental chatter is a crucial step to making thoughtful decisions that you won't regret later.

In the following case, we learn the story of a principal (we'll call her Ms. Hale) who did not calm her mind before taking a rash action that deeply affected staff morale.

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## THE CASE OF THE FAILED REMODEL

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Principal Hale  
Elementary School  
South Texas

Principal Hale was on her very last nerve because the modernization efforts to her school building were still incomplete. Although the remodel was scheduled to conclude over the summer, a number of setbacks occurred, and the construction crews were unable to finish on time. Air conditioning was one of those projects.

Instead of offering much-needed morale, Principal Hale found herself stuck, ruminating on everything that was going wrong: *“How can the front office possibly be ready for the stream of parents with questions? There is still heavy equipment in the front doorway and on the playground. How will teachers be ready, let alone provide a great first-day experience for 600 students, when they are still unpacking boxes? Will the cafeteria staff be able to feed students at lunch?”* These thoughts cycled endlessly through Principal Hale’s mind and she couldn’t turn them off. Her perceived lack of control manifested itself in the way she treated teachers. Principal Hale was frustrated and angry.

Since the school was almost completely gutted during the remodel, teachers were required to pack up their classrooms in June. Now that the first day of school for students was approaching, hundreds of boxes of books and classroom supplies were delivered and left outside teachers’ doors early Friday morning. There was a massive effort by teachers to drag all of their boxes inside their classrooms and organize their things as quickly as possible—they only had one day to prepare, though many would probably have to come in over the weekend.

Almost all of the teachers worked through lunch, putting up bulletin boards and arranging desks in anticipation of students’ arrival on Monday morning. Although the new windows were situated up high to allow natural light in the classrooms, the teachers were unable to open them. The air conditioning system was not yet functional, so some teachers had brought oscillating fans but the humidity was so high that the fans didn’t do much good. The teachers, soaked in sweat, continued to prepare for Monday.



At 3:30 p.m., Principal Hale made an announcement over the PA system. She asked that all teachers meet her in the school’s library at 4:00 p.m. She didn’t give a reason, so several teachers concluded that Ms. Hale was going to thank them for working so hard to prepare their classroom environments in the heat. Maybe there would be some ice-cold soda or other sugary treats?

Boy, were they wrong! There was no soda, no “thank-yous,” and no treats. Principal Hale had gathered the teachers to admonish them for complaining about the heat and humidity. It was true that three teachers had joked earlier that they looked more like contestants in a wet T-shirt contest than school teachers, but some sarcasm should have been expected. However, instead of shrugging off those comments or having private conversations with those three individuals, Principal Hale berated the whole teaching staff. Her admonishment made a bad situation a lot worse. Principal Hale’s reputation never recovered from that day; teachers transferred to other schools as quickly as they could.

### **Outcome:**

*Principal Hale didn’t pause to regroup when she felt emotional. Instead, she took out her frustration on staff members who didn’t deserve to be publicly admonished. Everyone saw the way Principal Hale handled the situation and lost confidence in her ability to be a servant leader who takes care of her staff. The teachers felt unappreciated and unacknowledged for working in miserable conditions.*

## **TOOL 1.1**

### **Stop, Drop, and Roll**

There is a remedy to the anger, angst, or confusion you might feel during a tough situation or when you feel overwhelmed by the myriad tasks to complete or people to see. Even if you prioritize balanced nutrition, exercise, and good sleeping habits to avoid making poor decisions, there may be instances when you are required to react. You don’t have the luxury of journaling or phoning a friend to talk you off of the ledge.

During these times, I suggest that you follow this simple mantra that we all remember from grammar school: stop, drop, and roll. Although it was a tool we memorized to save ourselves from fire, it is also useful in other contexts to help us maintain control. This tool can be used when dealing with angry parents or unkind coworkers. The idea is to take control of your breathing, let go of your ego, and move on.

Step 1: **Stop** the mental chatter that is preventing you from being present and aware of everything that is going on around you. When your thinking feels fractured, it is unlikely that you are fully able to comprehend all of the elements of the situation at hand. When you are able to be present, your ability to consider different options increases.

Step 2: **Drop** your ego. Let it go so that you can get out of your head and take stock of the situation at hand. When you free yourself from your ego, your thinking becomes clearer. It's not about you. Your mission is to keep students' well-being at the center of all decisions. When you take your ego out of the equation, you are more likely to consider situations logically and not make hasty decisions. Choose skillful action over reaction.

Step 3: **Roll** with it. Roll with it because stress is a choice. It may not feel like it, but you always have the ability to choose your attitude. Your attitude impacts others around you and in turn shapes your school's climate and culture. As Wayne Dyer, self-development author and speaker, reminds us, "when you have a choice to be right, or to be kind, choose to be kind."

Let's consider how using the Stop, Drop, and Roll tool may have been useful to Principal Hale (and her teachers) that hot Friday afternoon:

**Stop:** Principal Hale might have considered setting aside her angry feelings about the teachers' comments until she was emotionally ready to have private conversations with teachers.

**Drop:** What is the heart of the matter? Principal Hale might have asked herself, “*What am I really upset about? Is it the teachers? Is it the weather? Is it that the construction workers are still here and school begins on Monday morning?*” Had Principal Hale paused to consider the root cause of her anxiety, she might have realized it stemmed from the condition of the school building that Friday afternoon. She might have become aware that the teachers’ comments, although mildly inappropriate, were meant to make light of a miserable situation.

**Roll:** How might the conversations with the three teachers have gone if Principal Hale had waited until Monday to address her concerns? How might have staff morale been elevated if Principal Hale had provided some cold drinks and chocolate chip cookies on Friday afternoon? In this situation, there was nothing that Principal Hale could do to make the workers work faster. However, because of her position, Principal Hale did have a measure of influence over her teachers. She saw how hard everyone was working; she could have, and should have, said thank you. A bit of acknowledgment goes a long way.

By allowing her emotions to get the better of her, Principal Hale made a poor choice. Ultimately, that poor choice was a signal to the staff that Principal Hale was not the type of leader they wanted to work with each day. She had admonished them, and they had difficulty seeing past her actions on that day. Principal Hale failed to recognize the value of the idiom, “You’ll get more with sugar than with salt.” The teachers began to look for job opportunities in other schools. Ultimately, many of them transferred to other schools.

Principal Hale’s situation demonstrates how she failed to acknowledge the hard work of her teachers; they felt berated. Let’s take a look at another situation where a different principal (whom we’ll call Ms. Soto) also faced a difficult situation but took a care-based approach.

## THE CASE OF WEEKEND VANDALISM

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Principal Soto  
Elementary School  
Northern California

It was a Sunday afternoon and Principal Soto was enjoying the warm spring afternoon by reading a book on her balcony. The phone rang and she noticed it was someone from the district office. She answered the phone, wondering what had happened. Principal Soto was informed that the school had been broken into the previous night and besides theft of school computers, five classrooms had been sprayed with paint, chairs and desks had been tossed around, and contents from the classrooms had been thrown around the room.

Principal Soto inferred from the caller that the classrooms would be unusable by teachers and students the following morning. She considered her options: (1) She could move the teachers and children from those rooms to the auditorium; (2) she could split up classrooms and disperse students to other classrooms, placing a larger burden on those teachers who would be unprepared for additional children; or (3) she could request substitute teachers so the classroom teachers could take stock of missing items and help custodians to reassemble their classrooms. The cost for securing five substitute teachers would cost the school \$700, in addition to replacing items that were damaged during the break-in. Ms. Soto, like most administrators, didn't anticipate these extra costs when she designed her school budget earlier that school year, and they didn't have extra money.

So what did Principal Soto do? She chose to secure substitutes that Sunday afternoon so that the teachers could face their damaged classrooms and begin the cleanup process without having to simultaneously manage their students. The following morning the substitutes took all of the students to the auditorium and the teachers, custodians, and Principal Soto began cleaning the classrooms. Although the school had been vandalized, which hurt everyone's feelings, the teachers were able to clean up and prepare for Tuesday morning with their students.

Principal Soto reviewed the school budget and identified how the \$700 used for substitutes might be recovered without affecting students or staff. Since there wasn't any extra money, Principal Soto contacted the local Walmart and informed the store manager about the vandalism. The store manager agreed to donate paint, paper, and other classroom supplies, helping to make up for the money spent on substitutes. That week, and for weeks to come, Principal Soto's decision to arrange substitutes improved staff morale and demonstrated her compassion to the school community.

*Outcome: Principal Soto had to choose between staying within the budget and doing what was best for teacher and student morale. She chose to exceed the budget but found a way to make up the funds elsewhere.*

*Takeaway: Principal Soto's choice to arrange for substitute teachers brought peace of mind to her teachers and students. They were able to heal from the feeling that their school and their things had been violated. Principal Soto's gesture of providing subs signaled her understanding of the unease that teachers and students felt. It was an offering of one way to make a hurtful situation better.*

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Being a school principal can be challenging at times, so it's important to acknowledge the many ways you positively impact the school community. Undoubtedly, you will make mistakes; we all do. The ability to learn from your mistakes will help you to become the thoughtful and skilled leader that our students need and deserve. Don't be too hard on yourself. Your ability to stop, drop, and roll like Principal Soto will reduce the number of minutes, or hours, that you might otherwise spend fretting about a problematic situation.

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## DARE TO IMAGINE

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“The job of the school principal has never been an easy one, with increased accountability making it even more challenging and the

stakes higher than ever before” (Alvoid & Black, 2014, p. 28), and 75% of principals believe the job has become too complex (MetLife, 2013). Surviving, and thriving, in today’s school settings require that principals know themselves well. Modeling your core values and continually reflecting are two strategies that effective and successful leaders utilize to be purposeful, stay mentally sharp, and advance the school’s mission.

Ultimately, adhering to our values and practicing reflective leadership enables principals to become survivalists—the leaders our diverse students and communities need us to be. We have skin in the game. Called by a larger purpose, we can form alliances that unite people around a shared purpose. We can nourish ourselves and support each other along this journey. That you’ve picked up this book is a signal that you are the right person to lead the charge at your school. Dare to imagine how much better your work and outcomes for your students can be.

Before moving on to Chapter 2, clarify your purpose and mission by considering these questions:

## ACTIVITY 1.2

### Who Are You as a Leader?

I became an educational leader because . . .
The leadership values that I live by are . . .
My leadership vision is . . .
When making tough decisions, I evaluate my options by . . .
You will be able to see this at my school when . . .

### ACTIVITY 1.3

#### How Do You Make Decisions?

My responsibility to students' physical, emotional, and social well-being is evidenced by . . .
I seek counsel from . . .
I seek counsel when . . .
My commitment to actualizing all students' learning is seen when . . .
My responsibility to my district is . . .
I demonstrate my values to my school community when . . .
You will be able to see my ethics in action when . . .

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