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## *Your Chosen Journey*

### *Building a Better Leadership Career on Purpose*

*Think not of yourself as the architect of your career, but as a sculptor. Expect to do a lot of hard hammering and chiseling and scraping and polishing.*

—Forbes magazine

**A**t some point, most school leaders in America (including me and probably you) have asked, “What was I thinking?”

You can’t blame principals, superintendents, and other school officials for wondering why they ever left the relative calm and comfort of the classroom to jump into the firestorm of school leadership.

After all, educational leadership is not the same as leadership in the private or business sectors. In many respects it is more difficult. Superintendents, principals, and other school administrators differ from leaders in other fields in several substantive and subtle ways, including the following:

1. Their mission is not always clear or consistent as society’s demands and expectations change over time.
2. They often have little control over their sources of funding.
3. They play to more diverse audiences and serve a broader range of constituencies than other leaders.

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4. They have no quality control over their raw materials (students). They work with whatever the parents send them.
5. They function in a fishbowl. (Most CEOs don't have to contend with "open meeting" laws.)
6. The full results of their efforts are not always immediately measurable.
7. Their decisions can affect the entire community.
8. They are accountable to many "bosses."
9. They work in a highly political environment.
10. They lead in a field where everyone considers himself or herself an expert.

For all these reasons, leadership in schools is a little more tricky and complex than in most private-sector situations.

To make matters more difficult, everything in education itself is changing—just like always. But today's change is faster, deeper, and more pervasive. Expectations and mandates are up. Parental and societal support is down. Education has become politicized and polarized. The curriculum has become a religious battleground. School leaders definitely have more pressures and problems than ever before.

Not only is the educational environment changing, so is the profession of school leadership itself. Becoming a school leader is no longer a predictable vertical climb. Today, there are multiple pathways to leadership, including career spurts, lateral moves, planned descents, U-turns, trade-offs, and time-outs. Some authors compare being a school leader to playing the popular children's game Chutes and Ladders.

"Musical chairs" might be a better comparison. While the average American now changes jobs 10 times in a lifetime, school leaders are often more mobile. The average tenure for U.S. superintendents is now about three and a half years.

In the midst of these changes, school leaders are managing transitions and transformations of unprecedented proportions, including reconciling tenacious relics of the past with demanding harbingers of the future.

I'm reminded of a visit a few years ago to a quaint rural bed and breakfast inn in the Amish community of Yoder, Kansas. The owner delighted in describing for us a luncheon she had served earlier in the day to a group of Amish women. During the lunch, she happened to look out to the parking area behind her house and saw three horse-drawn carriages, two tractors with cabs (tractors are often driven by women in the community and are commonly called *Amish Humvees*), two pick-up trucks, and a recreational vehicle.

It was a panorama of the history of transportation parked in her own backyard. This could be a metaphor for what the landscape of leadership looks like to today's school executives. The old and new are competing for time, space, and attention all at once.

With all this upheaval, it's no wonder that there are an unparalleled number of openings and opportunities for active and aspiring school leaders. There are more vacancies and different kinds of leadership positions available than ever before.

In my state alone, one of five superintendencies was vacant as this book was being written. To make matters worse, it is increasingly difficult to fill leadership vacancies. The secondary school principalship is now the most difficult spot of all to fill. So is this a good time to be a school leader in America?

## IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT?

With apologies to Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, it is "the best of times and the worst of times" for school officials. Remember the old curse, "May you live in interesting times"? Every principal and superintendent I know feels the curse.

There's trouble aplenty in educational leadership, but there is still plenty of fun to be had out there as well—especially for passionate educators who value change and choice. Since you have chosen to read this book, the most relevant and compelling question must be, "Is it the right time for you to be or become a school leader?"

School leadership, at any level, is a tough, demanding, sometimes thankless, and often uncertain profession. Much of the work has to be invented as you go along. This is true of top leaders in most fields. Freelance writer Todd Nelson explains it this way, "Some CEOs live with a deep dark secret. They don't know what a CEO does." You and I have both known principals and superintendents who share this secret.

Prize-winning author Norman Mailer liked to compare life to a game of Texas Hold 'Em because it requires "balancing skill, bluffing, and luck." This could be another metaphor for school leadership as well.

There are many reasons not to become a school leader, including losing tenure, working long hours (60-hour work weeks are common for school administrators), losing direct contact with students on a daily basis, having to satisfy multiple constituencies, and being forced to play messy politics.

Obviously, school leaders wear many hats (see Figure 1.1). Educational leadership is layered, nuanced, and multidimensional. That's why "ambiguity tolerance" is an asset for effective school leaders.

Figure 1.1

### What a Superintendent Does

(Through the eyes of elementary students in the Westonka, Minnesota school district)

- Is king of all teachers.
- Drives nails to build new schools.
- Cleans hallways.
- Picks out gelatin flavors for school lunch.

Many teachers don't feel that the added grief of taking on a leadership position is worth the slight pay increase and the limited other perks associated with being an administrator. Some view becoming an administrator as "moving to the dark side of education."

Of course, there are positive incentives for becoming a school leader as well. Some cynical observers think these include power, money, and status. They're wrong. A few may move into administration for these reasons, but these are the ones who quickly falter and fail or, somehow, manage to fool people until a real leader comes along.

Real leaders choose administration because it broadens the scope of their impact. It gives them opportunities to grow and best express themselves through their work. It is the best way they can find to use their talents fully and to help kids more. It allows them to influence others (children and adults) to use their potential for the greater good. A position of leadership allows them to make a broader and deeper difference and leave a more lasting legacy.

These are powerful reasons to sign up for a lifetime of leadership on purpose. If they aren't your reasons, it might be a good time to run (not walk) to the nearest career counselor and look into a new occupation.

However, if you want to do what school leaders do for all the right reasons, the next logical question is, "Do you have what it takes to be a real school leader?"

## ARE YOU LEADERSHIP MATERIAL?

Volumes have been written about leadership characteristics. I've written some. You've read some. You probably know many of the desired qualities by heart. For example, the U.S. Marines have identified the following 14 leadership traits:

1. Justice
2. Judgment
3. Dependability

4. Initiative
5. Dedication
6. Tact
7. Integrity
8. Enthusiasm
9. Bearing
10. Unselfishness
11. Courage
12. Knowledge
13. Loyalty
14. Endurance

Likewise, author Clifton Taulbert details “eight habits of the heart” in his book of the same name that set successful school leaders apart:

1. Nurturing attitude
2. Dependability
3. Responsibility
4. Friendship
5. Brotherhood
6. High expectations
7. Courage
8. Hope

Noticeably, these two lists are similar, as is most of the popular cataloging of leadership traits. Of course, there are no single, universal leadership profiles. No real-life school leader possesses all of the qualities above, but most effective leaders have most of them.

In the real world, school leaders typically possess many of these characteristics, but leaders also come in all sizes, shapes, and personality types, and from varied backgrounds. Don’t worry if you are not the embodiment of perfection. Think of the best principals and superintendents you know. They’re not perfect, and they’re not clones or mirror images of each other.

During my career, I’ve worked for seven different superintendents. Of these,

one was reserved, formal, and paternal;

one was urbane, sophisticated, and “cool”;

one was down-to-earth and “aw shucks” rough around the edges;  
one was a little pompous; and  
others fell somewhere in between.

But all were effective school leaders. The point is that you don't have to sacrifice your true self to lead, but you will have to sacrifice some of your privacy and a good deal of your time.

Interestingly, research shows that leadership traits are transferable. What works in one field works in another. But there is one quality that distinguishes school leaders from leaders in other fields. That difference is an uncompromising, unflinching passion for helping kids—all kids—to survive and thrive.

To succeed as a school leader, genius-quality brainpower, golden-tongued oratorical skills, and advanced political savvy are all optional. Passion is mandatory!

It is possible to get and hold a job in school administration without being driven by a passion for students, but it is impossible to have a meaningful lifelong career in school leadership without it.

The school leaders you admire most are leaders because they have to be. It's not a job to them. It's a passion and a calling.

It is this compelling inner drive that separates effective school leaders from the false prophets, pretenders, and also-rans. Columnist Whit Hobbs may describe it best: “Success is waking up in the morning . . . bouncing out of bed, because there's something out there that you love to do, that you believe in, that you're good at. Something bigger than you are and you can't wait to get at it again today.”

That's passion. And that's what makes a great school leader. If you've never felt that way about your job, you're probably in the wrong job. Look again.

Another of my favorite ways to tell a genuine leader from a go-through-the-motions manager is simply that managers tend to talk about statistics, charts, and graphs. Real leaders talk about real children. Listen to how you talk about students, teachers, and schools. It's a form of litmus test for school leaders.

A few years ago, you may have heard the popular ad slogan for the Internet job search firm Monster, which admonishes that “your calling is calling.” The best principals, superintendents, and other school leaders hear the call. Do you?

If you are uncertain about a lifelong career in educational leadership, that's OK, but if you truly “have to” make school leadership your life's work, you can do it. You have what it takes, because you have the passion. There's a leader in there somewhere. You just have to find the right environment (or series of environments) to let it out.

The good news is that there are many choices and chances available to you today. You have more career and leadership possibilities than you realize (see Chapter 7). That's what makes it scary, confusing, and fun.

You don't have to follow any prescribed pathway to a leadership position in education any more. You don't even have to be the boss to be a leader. But if you truly want to end up with a remarkable career in school leadership according to your own design, you do have to take greater responsibility for your personal and professional growth and development. You can start from wherever you are whenever you are ready.

Of course, it's important to realize that just deciding you want a leadership career and having all the right qualifications doesn't necessarily make it happen the way you want it to.

Unfortunately, some administrators believe it is inappropriate, presumptuous, vain, egotistical, pushy, or self-indulgent to intentionally set out to plot their own career. They are content to wait for a ready-made career to come to them or for chance, luck, fate, serendipity, or the "Good Fairy of School Leadership" to create the right career for them. They're missing the point—and may miss out on their dream.

It's OK to think about, plan for, and work toward your own career vision. It's called living on purpose. If you don't have a vision, a dream, a plan, and a strategy, you don't have a clue.

## WHAT'S A CAREER? WHAT'S NOT?

One of the dirty little secrets of life as an educator is that no one else will chart, guide, or manage your leadership career for you. Good careers are self-made and customized. If you want it, don't wait for it. Work for it. The leadership career you grow depends on what you plant and how you nurture it to fruition.

For starters, just understanding the difference between having a meaningful lifelong career in educational leadership and merely marking time in a series of different administrative positions can change your life forever. You can't have a real career in school leadership (or anything else) until you understand what a real career is.

Most Americans can expect to work about 90,000 hours in their lifetimes. School administrators work even more. This is an enormous bite out of your years on this earth. It should mean something.

Obviously, there are many possible choices regarding how to spend your work years. Some choices lead nowhere but to a collection of forgettable days on the job and a pension when you're done. Other (better) choices can add up to a significant career and a lasting legacy in school leadership. You want the latter.

A monkey can throw a varied mixture of colors on a canvas, but that doesn't make a work of art. Likewise, throwing time away on a variety of different jobs does not create a true career.

Some educators retire after holding down a number of different jobs at different times, but they don't have any overall, cohesive career they can point to with pride. They feel unsatisfied and unfulfilled, as if they have

missed out on something important. I've known some of them. So have you. It's not a pretty sight. It doesn't have to be that way.

Other retired school leaders—the ones you want to pattern your career after—feel good about the legacy of contributions they've left behind because they remained true to their values and never lost sight of their goals. They know they've used their talents well and made a substantial difference. It doesn't get much better than that.

The acclaimed British broadcaster Kenneth Alspop explains it this way: "In work, the greatest satisfaction lies in the satisfaction of strengthening yourself, using your abilities and making them expand, and knowing that you have accomplished something that could have been done only by using your unique apparatus."

Alspop was writing about work in general, but he could have been writing about school leadership in particular.

A real career must include *satisfaction* (if you are not satisfied, challenged, and fulfilled, you can't do your best for kids and the community), *meaning* (important work that makes a difference), *empowerment* (brings out your best gifts to do the most good), and *integrity* (consistent with your values, goals, and life mission).

I know, I know, this is a mouthful. But it's difficult to sum up a life's work in a sound bite. If you don't like this lengthy definition of a successful leadership career, the short version is simply this: Learning how to do the most good you can and then doing it—on purpose.

Some cynics believe that a worthwhile career in school leadership is merely what happens while you're doing your job every day. It's true that you build your career, your reputation, and your legacy through daily decisions, actions, interactions, connections, and transactions on the job. But not on just any job!

A meaningful career as a school leader isn't the result of performing a series of disjointed jobs. It is the outcome of progressing through sequential chosen experiences (in one or many jobs) consistent with your goals and gifts that allow you to grow and expand your contribution to children and youth.

A great career in educational leadership is never an accident. It is a purposeful progression of achievement and development, culminating in a body of work that counts for something. Lifelong leadership is always a work in progress—an unfolding journey right up until the very last day at work.

Your career isn't about destiny. It's about decisions. You make it what it is. You own your work. If you take the initiative, you can decide what work you do, where you do it, how long you do it, and how well you do it.

Your career shouldn't be your life, but your life and who you are should shape your career. It's never a career until you care.

Likewise, a true career isn't just a matter of sticking it out for 20 or 30 years. There's a difference between a lifelong career and a life sentence.

Some administrators manage to slip by, slip through, or slip under the radar and build up a long tenure—but that's not a career. It is possible to keep a low profile, keep out of trouble, keep your job(s), keep your pension,



and retire without doing anything of lasting value. But I'm pretty sure you don't want that to happen on your watch.

A legacy of leadership isn't about how long, how far, how fast, or how high you go. It's about how much good you do for kids and the community along the way. If you don't leave the students, the school, and the community better than you found it, your career (as they say in Kansas) "isn't worth a hill of beans."

For better or worse, your career is mostly a series of decisions. Your future depends on who makes the decisions. To borrow a term from President George W. Bush, who's the "decider"? Do you want your life's work decided by chance? By default or by design?

Since you've read this far, you must want to be the one who calls the shots and makes the decisions affecting your pathway to school leadership. You're in good company. The best school leaders in the business consciously customize their careers. You can too. There are lots of sound reasons for taking charge of your own dream, your career, and your legacy.

## WHO'S IN CONTROL?

Life is motion. You and your career are always moving—up, down, laterally, diagonally, forward, or backward. You can't help it, and you can't stop it. But you can steer it.

To get what you want out of your professional life, it's always better if you choose your own direction. The best leaders build their careers with a purpose, a reason, and a goal in sight.

If you don't have a dream, a vision, a plan, a direction, or a destination in mind, you can end up almost anywhere—or nowhere. ("You don't want to get to the top of the ladder, only to find out it's leaning against the wrong wall"—Jack Canfield, *The Success Principles*.)

When you have no dream, your dream can't come true, and you can never experience triumph. Of course, it takes more than a dream to succeed as a principal, superintendent, or school leader of any kind, but your dream is the necessary first step on the pathway to a future of your choice.

It's amazing and appalling how many well-trained, intelligent, professional educators are stuck in career limbo, drifting along with no purposeful direction, no career plan, and not much chance of getting what they want out of their life's work. If you don't think there are examples of such lost souls in your own school district, look again. This is a crowd you want to avoid like the plague and pestilence.

After all, how much of your life are you willing to waste? How can you expect to be and do your best for students unless you consciously choose or create great opportunities that lead in that direction?

You can be the leader you want to be, but you have to take responsibility for the long-term management of your career development to make

it happen. Mediocrity is what occurs when life is left to its own devices. Greatness and excellence only happen on purpose.

Naturally, it's easier to do nothing to define or create your future. Inaction is always the most comfortable course. But comfort is overrated.

Charting your own course throughout a lifetime of school leadership means making difficult decisions and tough choices and taking some risks. But it's the choosing and the risking that gives you a rush. It's what motivates you to rattle some cages, shake the trees to see what falls out, grab opportunities when and where they appear, and push yourself to your full potential.

Some educators give up on having a great career because every step is not clearly laid out. They forget the old adage, "when nothing is certain, anything is possible." If you surprise yourself by taking control, your life's work may turn out better than you could ever imagine.

A word of caution, however: some administrators make a major mistake by building their career on the suggestions, wishes, or ideas of their family, friends, teachers, or peers. It's never wise to base your decisions on pleasing or impressing other people. Your future, your professional contribution, and your legacy shouldn't depend on the opinions, expectations, or permission of other people.

For example, when I was a relative newcomer to school administration, some of the power brokers in the district office got the bright idea that I was the ideal candidate to become supervisor of the social studies for our system of 25,000 students. I had the credentials, I had leadership experience, and I had been a successful social studies teacher. They thought it was a perfect fit. I knew it wasn't. I wanted a line position, not a staff or supportive role. I also didn't want to be restricted to a single subject area.

Nevertheless, the top brass persisted in lobbying me to accept the job. Ultimately, I relented and agreed to take the post with the understanding (I thought) that it would be a temporary stopover, not a final career destination. The front office was satisfied and thought it was settled. I wasn't and didn't.

Eventually, I had to move to another school district in order to return to general administration and broader leadership opportunities. It was a critical turning point in my life and my career in school leadership.

If I had been content to build my career around the wishes and desires of my superiors, I would have been stuck where I didn't want to be—and would have missed out on some remarkable opportunities to learn and to serve, some fulfilling, eye-popping experiences, and a whole lot of fun along the way.

Your career is your own to mold and shape unless you relinquish that right. Don't. It's much more exciting and satisfying to do it on your own. The best career advice you will ever get is to build your lifelong leadership according to *your* design, not someone else's.

But designing your own career path may not be exactly what you think it is. Before packing your bags for your journey of lifelong leadership,

you should be clear about the nature of the trip and what you can expect along the way.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT?

Taking charge of your own leadership career doesn't mean targeting any one particular administrative position. If you set your heart on a single "dream job," you only set yourself up for disappointment and failure. You cannot have a no-boundaries, no-limit career if you are fixated on a precise result from the very beginning.

When your plans are overly specific, you restrict your options, limit your possibilities, and run the risk of missing out on some amazing opportunities that you don't even know about and can't imagine. After all, tomorrow's dream job may not exist today.

The best example of career tunnel vision I know of was a talented woman administrator I worked with at one time whose only goal in life was to become a superintendent. She did everything in her power to seek out a superintendency—any superintendency.

She hopped from district to district in hopes of positioning or leveraging herself to snare her dream job. She applied for every superintendency that became vacant in our area. She was interviewed many times.

Unfortunately, she always remained a bridesmaid. She never got the job she planned and plotted for most of her adult life. To make matters worse, many of her peers did become superintendents.

Consequently, my frustrated friend finished out her career feeling somewhat disappointed, discouraged, dissatisfied, and unfulfilled. The truth was, however, that along the journey she had held many high-impact leadership positions, including special education coordinator, personnel director, and a variety of assistant superintendencies with diverse responsibilities.

Each of these posts had the potential of being a dream job in its own right. She had countless chances to use her talents to the fullest and to help kids in many profound ways.

Although she achieved a lot during her career, she couldn't see or appreciate all the possibilities because her sights were set elsewhere. She couldn't fully mine the diamonds in her own pasture because the grass always looked greener on the other side of the fence.

Planning for lifelong leadership in education doesn't mean locking yourself into any definite outcome. It means preparing yourself for many possibilities, placing yourself where good things can happen, learning how to attract or create unexpected opportunities, making wise choices among competing alternatives, and making the most of every opportunity to learn, grow, and serve that comes along.

Your journey won't be a clearly marked path leading to a predetermined destination. Rather, it will be an exploration of unknown territories,

uncovering many surprises, and accepting any number of alternate end points. If you're not up for the adventure, don't sign up for the trip.

With all this uncertainty, trying to peer into the future of your lifelong leadership is like looking into a kaleidoscope. There are countless configurations and possible patterns.

To prepare, the best you can do is identify a theme for your life's work that you want to develop in what may be a series of many different jobs. Then, build a portfolio of knowledge, skills, and experience that can be shaped in different ways and applied in various situations.

There are six dimensions of your career development that you can control:

1. Decision: the choice to pursue a specific career path.
2. Commitment: how dedicated you will be to achieving success.
3. Pace: how fast you work or progress.
4. Role: the kinds of tasks and responsibilities you are willing to accept.
5. Output: how hard you work and the results you produce.
6. Quality: the value you add to your work.

Concentrate on these, rather than on landing a certain job in the future.

The choices you make when you take on new or different tasks and responsibilities or when you change jobs become your path to leadership. The goal is *alignment*.

Search out opportunities that align your vision, passion, interests, and talents with the expectations, challenges, policies, and culture of the work environment.

When I think of alignment I'm always reminded of a former Minnesota colleague of mine named Walt. If you look up *alignment* in the dictionary, you may see his picture.

Walt hated cold weather and loved working in personnel and playing golf. I always thought he achieved the ultimate alignment when he landed a job as human resources director in a leading Florida school system and purchased a home adjacent to a golf course where he could play every day after work.

You may never reach the perfect harmony that Walt did, but to achieve alignment in your own career, never look for or accept a position or promotion merely for money, title, or status. In the long run, you will become a more effective leader and do more for kids if you embrace only those opportunities that are interesting, engaging, motivating, and make you valuable in multiple situations.

The job that gives you satisfaction and growth and meshes with your personal mission is your ideal job for the present. But always keep preparing for your next dream job (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2

### What to Look for in Your Next “Dream Job”

- Culture that shares your values
- Opportunities for learning and growth
- Challenges that develop and apply new skills
- Interesting and meaningful work
- Control over how you do the job
- Gateway to higher levels and greater opportunities
- High expectations
- Suitable rewards
- Appreciation for a job well done

Of course, you will encounter setbacks in your pursuit of lifelong leadership. Be prepared to be bigger than any temporary defeat. (No defeat is permanent unless you allow it to be.)

If some of your plans or dreams don’t work out, keep dreaming and make the job you have even better than the one that got away. There is more than one possible happy ending to every journey.

Bill George, author of *True North*, explains it better: “Leadership is not a simple journey . . . rather, it is a marathon journey that progresses through many stages until you reach your peak leadership . . . most leaders do not wind up where they thought they would be.”

You can be the leader you dream of becoming—but it may not happen according to plan. Plan anyway.

Of course, lifelong success requires more than planning. “Doing” counts too. But doing what?

## WHAT’S THE PLAN?

In educational administration, as in all fields, career building is an action sport. This point is underscored by career specialist and author Penelope Trunk, who reiterates, “A great career does not fall on you. You have to seek it out by moving in the direction your heart pulses.”

If you are serious about doing something to shape your life’s work on purpose, here is my favorite seven-step action process for career development in school leadership:

1. **Conduct a fearless self-appraisal.** (This is the “figuring out which direction your heart pulses” part.) Knowing what to do about your professional future begins with knowing yourself.

This requires an honest inventory of your skills, talents, core values, limitations, vulnerabilities, blind spots, priorities, personal deal-breakers, satisfiers, dissatisfiers, and commitment to helping kids (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3

#### “Who Am I?” Questions

- Who am I today? Who should I be? Who do I want to be?
- What do I care about? What do I enjoy?
- What is my purpose?
- Where can I use my gifts most effectively?
- What would I do for nothing?
- What do I think about most? Read about most? Talk about most?
- What is my passion? (Part of developing a strategy for lifelong leadership is giving yourself permission to follow your heart.)

Naturally, self-assessment is valuable only if you achieve some realistic skill awareness and a high level of what some authors call “intelligent objectivity”—the ability to see yourself through the eyes of an outsider.

Since effective school leaders are whole persons (not professional automatons operating in a vacuum), you need to survey your whole self—including outside interests, relationships, and connections.

And don’t forget about gauging your attitude. Attitude drives behavior. It can tell a lot about what kind of leader you will be and how people will respond to your leadership by the attitude you have towards kids, teachers, parents, your work, your employer, your subordinates, and what constitutes success (more about this later).

Ultimately, your leadership will be a reflection of who you are. After all, you are the raw material from which your life’s work will be constructed. You have to understand what you’ve got to work with in order to build the right career in the right way. Success always begins with self-knowledge.

## 2. Identify broad leadership goals.

Figure out what you want—not what specific job you want but what you want to achieve and be remembered for over your lifelong career in school leadership.

Determine what you want to do and can do, not just what you should do. Don’t be limited by your past. Your future can be much more than merely an extension of what’s gone before.

To jump-start your thinking, following are some useful tips for clarifying what you really want from your career as a school leader:

- Consult your dreams. Your dreams can give you direction and provide clues to your inner desires. Dreams aren't fantasy if you make them happen.
- Visualize yourself in alternative futures. Which ones seem to be the best fit?
- Extrapolate from what you already enjoy and do well.
- Learn from your heroes. Who would you like to emulate—not copy but pattern your career after? In my hometown recently, students worked with a professional artist to compile a coloring book featuring everyday local “super heroes” (e.g., teachers, volunteers, fire fighters, police, doctors, first responders, faith leaders, senior citizens). When completed, a coloring contest was held for elementary students to promote awareness of local role models. Who would you put in your coloring book? Why? What can they teach you about helping kids?
- Listen to the many voices telling you what you should do but listen most closely to the voice inside.
- Allow your subconscious to work on what you want most. Sometimes, gut feelings are better guides than the brain's best logic.

**3. Redefine success.** If success to you means money, power, and possessions, you can let your administrator's license lapse. You're in the wrong field.

To the truly legendary school leaders, success means continually growing, finding ways to make things better for students, and sowing seeds that will benefit those whom they will never see or know. It is measured by the ratio between what you are and what you might be.

Success is multidimensional and ongoing. You don't achieve success; you have to continually create it. Never stop redefining success until you get your first pension check. And maybe not even then.

If you organize your life's work around this definition, you too can experience satisfaction and success in your lifetime that is beyond your boldest dreams.

**4. Develop a personal mission statement.** A personal mission statement is a carefully crafted and concise (usually one page) declaration of your primary purpose in life and in your career. Such a customized mission statement can do for an individual what a corporate mission statement does for an entire organization.

It spells out in everyday language (no jargon or “educationese” allowed) what's most important, how you want to live your life, and the kind of contribution you want to make to kids and the community. It keeps you focused, centered, and purpose driven (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4

### The Power of a Personal Mission Statement for School Leaders

A clean, clear personal mission statement does the following:

- Answers the questions, What kind of school leader do I want to be? and How do I want to be remembered?
- Commits you to living up to the best in you every day
- Serves as a tool for decision making, prioritizing, and allocating resources
- Reminds you of why you wanted to be a school leader
- Helps organize daily living
- Clarifies how you want to spend time and energy
- Boosts efficiency and productivity
- Serves as a conscience for your career
- Shows others what you stand for

There is no one style, formula, or format for writing a workable personal mission statement. The idea is to keep it short, simple, and personal.

Your personal statement of mission contains words to live by. They are your words. Live by them, and you will become a better school leader. Not bad for a single sheet of paper.

5. **Consider a career (life) coach.** Even champions need coaches. In our fast paced, fast-forward society, it's easy to get distracted, lose sight of who you really are, forget why you chose to be a school leader in the first place, and even sell out to the wrong master. Sometimes it takes a nudge from an objective third party to get you back on track.

That's why more and more school administrators, and executives in all fields, are turning to career (life) coaches to help them identify, verify, clarify, refine, resurrect, or redirect their primary leadership goals and recommit to their personal mission statement. A career coach is simply a personal trainer for the psyche.

Working with a personal coach is a collaborative partnership—a one-of-a-kind relationship—focused on helping you make better life and career choices.

If there is an uncomfortable gap between what you are at this moment and what you want to be as a person and as a school leader, a career or life coach may be just what you're looking for. If you think you can't afford a career coach, think again. To be your best, maybe you cannot afford not to have one.

6. **Experiment, learn, grow.** Whatever your administrative assignment or position, the fine print in your job description should require that you choose a life of growth. The best school leaders never stop getting better.



Every career in school leadership is full of surprises and unanticipated possibilities. That's why you constantly need to test the water, expand your knowledge base, and add to your skills.

To prepare for the unexpected and the unknown, learn what you don't know, place yourself in different work settings, take on new tasks and responsibilities, learn from crucibles (life-changing experiences), and practice selective volunteering.

Seek opportunities outside your comfort zone. Get as much and as varied training as possible. Consider graduate school, internships, and interim assignments. Read every day. (Corwin alone, the publisher of this book, has literally hundreds of titles that can expand and enhance your leadership capabilities.) Turn your car into a mobile classroom by listening to instructive tapes. School leadership is a lot more about learning than it is about giving orders.

If your supervisors don't or won't give you new, different, and difficult challenges, challenge yourself. Give yourself homework. But avoid assignments or opportunities that only burnish your defects. Seek experiences that build on your strengths.

No one ever hurt his or her career or his or her legacy by continuously improving. The only way you can help kids more than you are now or gain greater satisfaction from your work is to get better at what you do. If you are serious about lifelong leadership by design, get crackin'. It's a learner's world out there in today's ever-changing environment of school leadership.

**7. Keep your antennae out.** Opportunity in educational leadership is a tricky thing. It pops up unannounced and often comes from places where you would least expect it. Sometimes, it is disguised and doesn't reveal its full potential at first glance. If you aren't paying attention and are not constantly open to experience, opportunity may slip by unnoticed.

Keep your eyes open. Recognize a good opportunity when you see one. Don't dismiss any possibility without a good look and never say *never*.

Be willing to accept a great challenge without hemming and hawing and pawing the ground. If it fits your dream, go for it. Often when more than one person is qualified for a great opportunity, the prize goes to the first one to say yes.

When I was offered an assistant principalship in a brand new high school after having only five years of teaching experience, I had many misgivings, but I accepted immediately anyway. If I had thought about it longer, I might have been scared off, or if I had hesitated, someone else would have gotten the job. I didn't know it at the time, but when I said yes to that one job, I was saying yes to lifelong leadership by design.

The take-home lesson here is that one of the secrets to successful school leadership is to say yes to good opportunities first and figure out how you're going to handle things later.

Professional fishermen never catch fish until they cast out their net. There's a message here for aspiring school leaders. Let people know you

are interested, ready, and open to new challenges, experiences, and opportunities. Keep in touch with college contacts. Tap into your network; that's what it's for. Keep active in professional organizations. Know where the jobs are and where they are going to be. After all, your future depends on finding the right job, making your existing job right for you, or creating a new job that never existed before.

It's not crass self-promotion to let people know about your dreams, to go where the jobs are, and to make yourself visible. It's called lifelong leadership by design.

Opportunity comes to those who are ready to receive it. Be ready. Be home and answer the door when it knocks.

Following the seven-step action plan above won't guarantee you the highest paid job in the profession. But it will assure that you've done all you can to help kids to the best of your abilities, to make the best use of all your gifts, and to build a legacy you can be proud of.

Your chosen journey as a school leader is an exciting and noble quest involving education, incubation, exploration, development, discovery, and coming into your own. Relish the journey. The journey is where the fun is. ("One day in retirement, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful"—Sigmund Freud, father of modern psychoanalysis.)

I can't resist comparing your journey to the story Michelle Simpson (my favorite life coach) tells about her impatience while waiting for a butterfly to burst forth from its cocoon:

What was taking so long? We wanted it to come out now . . . everything in life is a process that cannot be rushed. The butterfly knew this. It needed to take its own time to be ready. . . . I want things to happen when I want them to happen. Not so, teaches the butterfly. Slow down, be still and be patient. When the time is right, magnificent things will happen. When you are ready, *be bold and go*. And so the long-awaited birth came yesterday. I watched in awe as the butterfly pumped fluid through its wings and proudly showed off its wing span. The butterfly reminded me of the importance to show life what you've got. Show your gifts and talents. Be bold and claim your place in the world. When we let go of our old "stuff," we become ready to boldly stretch our wings and soar to new heights.

This sounds a lot like the process of becoming an effective school leader to me. When you've done all you can to prepare and position yourself for a great career (e.g., the seven steps), all that's left is to keep doing it, never give up on your dream, and be patient. Your career will emerge. And "magnificent things will happen."

But when will it emerge? How will it emerge? What shape will it take? What direction will it take? How high will it soar? A lot depends on seven critical choices.