

***From Leading to Succeeding: The Seven Elements of Effective Leadership in Education.* By Douglas Reeves. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2016. ISBN: 1936763915.**

“I have about thirty seconds to persuade you that this book is different from the other thousands of books on the subject of leadership” (Reeves, 2016, p. 1). These catchy, attention-grabbing words make the opening statement of Douglas Reeves’ new book *From Leading to Succeeding: The Seven Elements of Effective Leadership in Education*. Ambitious in its scope, the book overviews seven elements that successful principals must embrace. Effective leadership, Reeves claims, “isn’t the result of an innate set of mystical powers,” (p. 3) but rather a process of learning. In his latest book, Reeves, a respected educational researcher and motivational speaker, sets out to describe and prove with credible links to recent academic research that effective school leadership is achievable if principals reshape their practice around seven core elements. Easy to read and convincingly persuasive, Reeves’ seven-chapter book fulfills its promise of moving from research to action. The book analyzes one core element of leadership in each chapter and provides the empowering message that effective leadership is accessible. What Reeves fails to take into account, however, is the complexity of the contexts educational leaders work in, the unpredictability of a principals’ day, and the personal characteristics one brings to the table – or doesn’t. Reeves’ seven elements provide a valuable framework for leaders to work with, however, his claim that leadership is dependent on them is overly simplistic. Let’s take a closer look.

Reeves (2016) lays out seven elements that he argues allow a school principal to become effective: purpose, trust, focus, leverage, feedback, change, and sustainability. The order, as he explains at the outset, is key and the elements compounding. First, Reeves encourages principals to be sure of their own purpose and that of the school. He cautions leaders against wordy, jargon-filled and confusing mission statements that claim to lead a school, yet in reality accomplish very little. “If you can’t recite your mission and vision statements from memory,” he states, “I hope that this chapter inspires you to re-examine...them” (p. 22). Having declared a clear purpose, a leader needs to next gain their staff’s trust by openly admitting their own mistakes and building a culture of workplace trust. In this spirit of openness, leaders must focus their energy and attention on projects worthy of their attention. These choices must be based on the school’s published purpose and openly discussed with staff, thereby contributing to the collaborative culture. Reeves urges leaders to “weed [their] educational garden” (p. 47) and focus their time only on projects that directly support or implement their identified purpose. When a school has legitimate focus, he argues “it discovers the leverage points that yield the greatest impact on student learning” (p. 53).

Having set the foundation with purpose, trust and focus, principals can next direct their energy to action-based leadership: leverage, feedback, and change (Reeves, 2016). To have the greatest impact, a leader must undertake projects that have the greatest influence on student learning. Principals “lose their leverage when they are firefighters rather than instructional leaders” (p. 65). To this end, just as teachers must provide meaningful feedback to their students to achieve results, instructional leaders must provide their staff with feedback that is FAST – fair, accurate, specific, and timely (Reeves, 2016). By routinely providing this feedback, leaders establish a culture of constant improvement that allows space for growth and change. With this sixth element, Reeves suggests that a leader’s capability to effect organizational change is directly

linked to both their personal attitude and their school's readiness to embrace change. He urges leaders to question the role their personal network plays in their own attitude and concludes that "leaders whose responsibility includes changing the practices, behaviours, and culture of schools can only succeed if they are willing to model change themselves" (p. 95).

Reeves' final chapter addresses what can be seen as a unicorn of change leadership: sustainability. Addressing the question "how to make leadership stick" (p. 97), Reeves analyzes Michael Fullan's (2005) eight elements of sustainable leadership and from them concludes that effective organizational change can be boiled down to three main elements: telling the truth, focusing on priorities, and providing feedback. He ends his book encouraging principals to write a letter to their future self, outlining their hopes and aspirations for the school, then make it their mission to achieve them by the end of their term in the school.

Whether for the aspiring leader or the current principal, Reeves' book is certainly a motivational read. He achieves his goal of moving research into action: his extensive four-page bibliography is effectively condensed to layman's terms, void of educational jargon that make eyes droop and attention waver. Reeves' catchy writing style grabs attention and sustains it to the end, leaving the reader with a satisfying feeling that effective leadership is within their grasp. Reeves' claims that with his seven elements, a principal can be effective. However uplifting, the book fails to account for both the personal qualities of the leader and the organizational complexities schools offer every day.

First of all, Reeves (2016) begins by outlining that his seven elements of leadership are not a to-do list, but rather facets that effective leaders have and actions they do. Yet instating at the outset, "miss even a single one of these essentials, and the efforts of even the most earnest leaders are far less likely to be effective" (p. 7), he creates a checklist of sorts which leaders must meet and move on from. While it is hard to argue that the qualities he describes paint an ideal portrait of a school leader, it is not the reality of every person who finds themselves behind a principal's desk. If Reeves' suggests his seven elements are the recipe, of sorts, for leaders to follow and see success, what is the leader who misses one step to do? Reeves' suggests at the outset that effective leadership is rare (p. 1), but by reducing effective leadership to so few consecutive qualities in an order that must be respected, rather than uplifting leaders as it purports to do, it truly restricts who can be considered a truly effective leader.

Furthermore, Reeves' (2016) seven steps to efficiency imply a leader enters a building with a clean slate to meet staff who are willing to learn, embrace culture willing to change and accept its leader's openness. This is far from the reality every principal faces. For instance, to create a foundation he argues school goals must be aligned with the principal's vision. What if a principal who starts her/his position halfway through the year? Is a new principal to overhaul their school's mission as soon as she assumes leadership of the school? Reeves further argues that leaders focus only on projects that provide the most impact on student learning, by practicing "calendar integrity" and only spending their time on initiatives that align with the established school mission (p. 31). While a worthy goal to streamline a principal's time to student success, this fails to account for district responsibilities, emergencies, student discipline, or any of the other action items that land on a principal's desk throughout the day. Does Reeves' focused principal ignore these other duties, which are so entrenched in our school system, or does this

suggest a system-wide change that is necessary before a principal can practice perfect calendar integrity?

Finally, Reeves' (2016) claims that in order to effect meaningful change, a leader must achieve full staff buy in. This implies the staff is ready for change, willing to invest their time in professional development and ready to receive feedback. Only then will real change take place. How do we create a culture where administrators and teachers can effectively collaborate towards student success in the classroom? Reeves equates waiting for staff buy-in to waiting for "the next geological era to begin," (p. 93) yet offers few suggestions to create it in the modern school. This underscores the main problem with Reeve's seven elements of leadership: at first glance they seem easy attain, yet little time is spent on the day to day realities that could bring them to life, nor the time it would take to truly overhaul a school.

*From Leading to Succeeding* (Reeves, 2016) is a motivational read and has many salient lessons for the current and aspiring school leader. His seven elements are thoughtfully described, drawn from bodies of relevant research. One puts the book down feeling as though they have a seven-step guide to becoming effective. This motivational style that makes the book so appealing, however, is exactly what draws its main critiques: Reeves' suggestions remain superficial, do not stray from the ideals into the complex, political and time-sensitive reality that is a principal's day.

#### **Reference:**

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. As cited in Reeves, D. (2016). *From leading to succeeding: The seven elements of effective leadership in education*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

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