Preface

We've heard many of our colleagues comment over the years, "My job as a principal would be great if I didn't have to deal with all of those problem people." In spite of increased accountability, trying to help all students be successful, working with a shrinking budget, and making the best of aging facilities, today's principal has to effectively manage and work with the entire staff in order to increase their productivity. In that larger mix comes the ability to work with "difficult" employees.

Just what is a difficult employee? There are as many types of difficult employees as there are employees, but these are generally the people in your school who concern you and cause you to wake up in the middle of the night worrying about them, wondering if you've done enough to work with them to help make them productive members of your staff. These are the employees with the bad attitudes, the ones who are always negative, who seem to cause most of the problems at the school, and who get the most complaints. A difficult employee can cause all kinds of issues and problems for you as the school leader. Each of us has our own definition of difficult employees and the level of difficulty they bring to the job.

Many of us in leadership positions were not like these difficult employees when we were in their positions. Many of us towed the line and tried to do our best. We aspired to be leaders, so we put ourselves in their positions and tried not to cause trouble. As you assumed your first leadership position, you were probably surprised at how many issues some people bring to the workplace. One of the statements we make to the people we work with to improve their skills in working with difficult people is "You will be amazed at all of the creative ways people get into trouble. You will see people do things that get them into trouble that you could have thought of when you were in their position." While this high level of creativity is interesting and, upon reflection, somewhat entertaining, it can be serious and can threaten your school if not addressed properly.

This book was designed to help educational leaders such as principals, assistant principals, superintendents, directors, and other supervisors to learn and apply the techniques and strategies needed in order to effectively

deal with difficult school employees. The ideas presented in this book represent not only our knowledge from many different sources over the years but also our own experiences in working with difficult school employees in our various educational roles. We have both had extensive experiences in working productively with marginal, deficient, and downright difficult school employees. As you review the ideas and strategies presented here, you might think our success is due to the fact that we are just confident and "hard" administrators. But we assure you, none of what has made us successful has come naturally; we have had to learn these strategies and fit them into our personalities and leadership styles.

Why is it important that you understand that we are not naturally mean and assertive supervisors? We believe the skills outlined in this book can be learned and implemented by almost anyone or any personality in a leadership position. So whether you are naturally good at conflict and confrontation or you are someone who shies away from negative interactions with others, you can improve your leadership skills and competencies by learning and mastering the skills and strategies that we outline here.

The book is laid out in a manner that we think will benefit you and your understanding as you learn the skills. It is not designed to be read cover to cover, but rather used as a resource where you can go to the specific section that you think will be most beneficial to your own learning. We also tried to keep the information fairly focused on the core you would need in order to understand the concepts presented without providing too much to bog you down in your reading. You will quickly notice the extensive use of templates, bullet points, and key points to help focus your reading. Each chapter begins with a short overview of the content to be presented and ends with a summary and questions to give you a chance to reflect on what you learned as a result of reading.

You will also notice the use of stories and vignettes, all of which are real. Either we have experienced them or colleagues we have worked with over the years have experienced them. To protect the anonymity of those involved, we have changed the names, genders, and situations in presenting these stories and vignettes. We chose to include them in order to provide clear illustrations and ideas for the busy educational leaders using this book.

The book is divided into two distinct sections. The first part, which encompasses Chapters 1–4, outlines some generic strategies and techniques that are intended to be used with difficult school employees. The information provided in Chapter 1, "The Nature of Difficult/Marginal Employees: Why Don't These People Listen to Reason and Improve?" is important because knowing it may help you understand how they got to be difficult and thus develop strategies to work with their situation. Chapter 2, "What Skills and Tools Do I Need in Order to Take On This Situation?" outlines the background you need in order to be successful in working with difficult employees. Chapter 3, "Strategies for Confronting

Marginal and Deficient Behaviors," discusses specific techniques that will help you successfully confront and address the behaviors of the difficult employees that you encounter. One skill normally not developed in school leaders is self-protection. When we choose to take on difficult school employees and deal with their behavior, we place ourselves in a position in which we can become emotionally vulnerable. Chapter 4, "Protecting Yourself When Dealing With Difficult Employees," presents strategies to help you stave off emotionally draining attacks while staying on track with your improvement agenda.

The second part of the book provides specific information for several employee groups that you will most commonly encounter as a school leader. Chapter 5 is titled "Strategies for Working With Difficult/Marginal Teachers." We start with this group because teachers comprise the largest employee group in most schools. Chapter 6, "Strategies for Working With Difficult/Marginal Administrative Assistants and Office Staff," discusses techniques for working positively with these crucial employees. Even though they don't normally have a lot of interactions with children, these employees do interact with parents and members of the public. A difficult or marginal administrative assistant or other office staff member can quickly destroy the climate and reputation of the school.

Finally, two other employee groups are discussed in this text. Chapter 7, "Strategies for Working With Difficult/Marginal Paraprofessionals and Teaching Assistants," focuses on employees that have extended opportunities to interact with children. Schools are hiring more of these professionals as a result of special needs students and declining budgets. Members of this employee group pose unique challenges for school leaders because of their quasiteaching responsibilities coupled with, in many cases, their lack of professional training in teaching techniques. Chapter 8, "Strategies for Working With Difficult/Marginal Custodians," provides ideas for confronting employees in this group. Like office staff, custodians influence parental and public perceptions of your school. Making sure they are competent and working to their fullest potential is paramount to your success as a school leader.

Taking on difficult employees is one of the most difficult parts of our job as school leaders. It is not a part of the job that comes easy. We hope you find the ideas and strategies presented in this book helpful as you take on this challenging but necessary leadership task. We wish you success in this endeavor.