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No More Lake Wobegon

Creating a Culture of Learning

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

John Wooden

The Effects of Well-Intended Fiction: A Culture of Nice

The relationship between teacher quality and student learning is clear. Effective teachers significantly influence student achievement. A growing body of research finds teaching to be the single most important school-based factor impacting student performance. When we combine this fact with the current statistics that indicate most teachers in this country receive satisfactory evaluation ratings, one might conclude that student achievement is soaring. And yet, we don't have to look far to find statistics that reveal a growing gap in the knowledge and skills students need to compete in the global economy of the twenty-first century. In his book *Results Now* (2006), Mike Schmoker described the "shock and awe" he experienced visiting classrooms. I share one of the most striking studies from Schmoker's book:

In 2005, Learning 24/7 conducted a study based on 1,500 classroom observations. Their findings:

- 4% Classrooms in which there was evidence of a clear learning objective
- 3% Classrooms in which there was evidence of higher order thinking
- 0% Classrooms in which students were either writing or using rubrics
- 85% Classrooms in which fewer than one half of students were paying attention
- 52% Classrooms in which students were using worksheets
- 35% Classrooms in which non-instructional activities were occurring (p. 18)

Despite an increasing number of similar studies that demonstrate a growing achievement gap, teacher evaluation statistics remain unchanged. Teacher evaluation systems fail to reliably assess teacher performance. Instead of capturing the variation in teacher effectiveness that one would expect to see in *any* school system, most teachers fall into the same category, satisfactory or above. From the report issued by the Center for American Progress, *So Long, Lake Wobegon?* (Donaldson, 2009), they revealed that:

- Over four years, nearly 100 percent of Chicago teachers were rated "satisfactory" or above.
- Ninety-six percent of San Bernardino, CA's teachers met or exceeded expectations for the 2002–03 and 2003–04 school years.
- Between 1995 and 2005 only 1 in every 930 teachers (.1 percent) in Illinois received an unsatisfactory rating.
- Ninety-nine percent of Oregon teachers are rated satisfactory each year. (p. 9)

I've read hundreds of reports completed by school leaders from all over the country. Many teacher evaluation reports today represent nothing more than a well-intended fiction. Satisfactory ratings are given in the absence of any evidence to support them. Accolades to the teacher abound and, in rare instances, a few suggestions for improvement are noted. In one district where we reviewed over one hundred reports, the field for evidence on the report read "No comments." Next to "No comments" was a rating of "Effective," or "Highly Effective."

I'm sure some would argue that the amount of time these reports consume is a contributing factor. They believe there simply isn't enough time to collect and provide evidence to support all of the ratings for every teacher and, besides that, they tell me, "I know these teachers are doing a great job." Although there are a number of factors that contribute to the lack of consistency, validity, and reliability of evaluation reports, I believe that what we're witnessing is yet another effect of the rose-colored glasses phenomenon described in Chapter One.

As a result, many school environments today suffer from what Garrison Keillor referred to as the "Lake Wobegon" effect, where most if not all teaching is rated above average. This has tremendous impact on how teachers regard opportunities for professional learning aimed at improving practice. When overall teacher performance is rated satisfactory (or better), it presents a challenge to school leaders to create a culture where improving teacher quality is valued. After all, if it's not broken, why fix it?

The Changing Landscape

Experts and education leaders have increasingly come to see current teacher evaluation methods as inadequate, largely because they fail to differentiate between teachers with varying levels of effectiveness. Recognizing the importance of teacher quality to student learning, policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels are now focusing on new measures of teacher effectiveness, aimed at improving teacher performance. From the Department of Education's Race to the Top initiative that urges states and districts to use measures of student growth as part of a teacher performance evaluation to the District of Columbia's IMPACT system that led both to significant bonuses for high performing teachers and the dismissal of low performing teachers, there is an increasing demand for more transparent and accurate methods to quantify teacher performance. These new programs aimed at improving the quality of teaching will change the landscape of Lake Wobegon.

A central principle of the Race to the Top criteria is that states need viable approaches to measure the effectiveness of teaching, provide a rating to each individual teacher, and use those ratings to inform professional development, compensation, promotion, tenure, and dismissal. A state's approach must include multiple measures, including measures of student growth. Other measures must be used

in ratings of teacher effectiveness, such as structured observations of teachers, review of teacher portfolios, and assessments of teacher competencies, knowledge, and skills.

What does this mean for the teachers of Lake Wobegon and beyond? Simply stated, it means that teacher ratings will change. Teachers who have become accustomed to receiving the highest rating each year (usually this is "satisfactory"), may no longer achieve the highest score. The lens through which we examine the quality of teaching has changed. It includes a much more comprehensive look at teaching than we have settled for in the past, with research-based standards and levels of performance that raise the bar across the board. As a result of this new lens, the landscape of teacher effectiveness will also change. Teachers and school leaders will have greater opportunities for constructive feedback about teaching and learning, focused on specific components of practice.

How can school leaders help teachers change existing mindsets that fear constructive criticism and feedback to mindsets that create school environments where professional learning for all is an expectation and teachers understand that you don't have to be bad to get better? This chapter will describe the process of implementing this change beginning with the leader's role in setting the stage for moving the staff forward. Just as there are certain qualities that enable leaders to remove their rose-colored glasses and view teaching through a clear, objective lens, leaders who are able to cultivate the ground and ready it for change approach this task armed with a set of beliefs and understandings about learning.

The Leader's Role: Essential Beliefs and Understandings

Changing Beliefs: Practice Comes First!

We all make choices about how to allocate our time. Most of us tend to spend more time in places and to do things that we are comfortable with, enjoy, or that have given us the greatest level of satisfaction in the past. Conversely, we tend to avoid or put off those tasks that appear overwhelming, stressful, or unpleasant. Leaders who bring successful teaching experiences to their role are more likely to be found in classrooms and engaged in professional conversations with teachers. This is where they are most comfortable and have seen the greatest impact in learning. They don't wait for an opportune moment to visit a classroom to listen in on what students are learning

or to talk with a teacher about that teacher's success implementing the new math series. They just do it.

There are, of course, other leaders who bring little or no teaching experience to their position. Or, they may have entered their administrative role without having had much success in the classroom. They may not recognize the connection between effective practice and student learning, because they've never experienced the *aha moments* students have when learning happens. These leaders may be really great at developing a master schedule or finding extra money in the school budget to hire extra staff, but when it comes to instruction and learning they are more comfortable delegating those responsibilities to others, giving them time to stick with what they know and do well. What we need are leaders (and teachers) who believe that student learning is the single most important responsibility of teachers and that improving the quality of teaching is the most important role of school leadership.

How do we begin to change beliefs about what is most important? When the new process is unfamiliar, questions past practices, or pushes at the margins of existing skills sets, believing in the value of change presents a challenge. Even when school leaders themselves are committed to providing opportunities for teacher learning, changing existing mindsets and norms can be very difficult. All school leaders have experienced the power of prevailing cultures to undermine change efforts. I recall being asked by a veteran teacher, "Why are we being asked to develop goals for professional learning when no one has ever said there is anything wrong with our teaching?"

As Doug Reeves (2007), renowned author and expert in the field of leadership and learning states, "To challenge that culture, school leaders must be prepared to stand up for effective practice even if changes are initially unpopular. . . . Change inevitably represents risk, loss, and fear, a triumvirate never associated with popularity" (p. 86). Although conventional wisdom is that beliefs drive our behavior, a number of respected educators and researchers challenge this perspective. Tom Guskey (1999) presents a model for change that demonstrates the power of experience in shaping beliefs:

> The crucial point is that it is not the professional development *per se,* but the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs. They believe it works because they have seen it work, and that experience shapes their attitudes and beliefs . . . the key element in significant change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs is clear evidence of improvement in the learning outcomes of their students. (p. 384)

During one of my years as a classroom teacher, I had an inclusion class with twenty-seven fifth graders, six of whom had been identified with learning disabilities. As a result, there was a teaching assistant assigned to my room whose role was to provide instructional support throughout the day. At the time, the district was having difficulty filling daily requests for substitute teachers, so they would frequently send the teaching assistant to classrooms where they needed coverage. This frequently left me on my own to manage a very needy group of students. Although it presented a great challenge, it turned into one of the most valuable learning experiences that changed my beliefs, and ultimately my practice. During this period of time, I learned that these fifth graders were more capable than I ever imagined of taking responsibility for their learning. Without an assistant to help out, I quickly realized that I would need the students to step up and indeed they did. With a few new structures and routines in place, students began to rely on each other for help, asking questions when they would get stuck, pairing up to complete a task, and even designing a list of work they could do independently while waiting for help from the teacher. It was amazing, and it changed my beliefs about my role as a teacher. The more I expected of the students, the more they would take on. The students were willing participants in this change, confessing they liked having additional responsibility and choice in their learning.

When it comes to change, experience and practice win out every time. Richard Elmore (2010) has made the same observation:

> Resilient, powerful new beliefs—the kinds of beliefs that transform the way we think about how children are treated in schools, for example—are shaped by people engaging in behaviors or practices that are deeply unfamiliar to them and that test the outer limits of their knowledge, their confidence in themselves as practitioners, and their competencies. (p. 2)

This has tremendous implications for both teachers as well as school leaders. In his article "What Can We Do About Teacher Resistance?" Jim Knight (2009) states, "When it comes to change, teachers have to drink the water, so to speak, before they will believe" (p. 510).

Drinking the Water

One of the best ways to give school leaders and teachers an opportunity to "drink the water" is by participating in short, brief

classroom visits that are followed by a professional conversation between the leader and teacher. Without any strings of evaluation attached, leaders can spend ten minutes in a teacher's classroom, and they will have seen and heard enough about teaching and learning to be able to engage that teacher in a meaningful conversation about practice. These visits can also occur among teachers, when they visit each other's classrooms and then have an opportunity to talk, reflect, ask questions, and engage in professional learning. Once teachers and leaders experience the benefit of these visits, their beliefs and attitudes about classroom observations and the conversations that follow begin to change. They will view these visits as learning opportunities, rather than a chance to get raked over the coals.

I frequently visit classrooms around the country for the purpose of helping teachers and school leaders develop the skills needed for these visits to be meaningful and productive. I will never forget the response a high school physics teacher had after a brief visit to an English teacher's classroom on one of my visits to a high school in a suburb of Rochester, New York. The physics teacher was so inspired to see the strategies used by her colleague in the English department that she was hardly able to sit still in her seat during our debrief session to discuss the lesson. She couldn't wait to follow up with her colleague to learn more about how he set up the learning activity with his students so successfully!

These brief classroom visits are just one example of how practice drives beliefs. School leaders will be more successful in leading change that improves teaching when they provide teachers with opportunities to experience the benefits of changing practice. Reeves (2009) validates the importance of providing teachers with frequent opportunities to recognize effective practice. He calls them "short-term wins" explaining that effective leaders create short-term wins by designing plans for teachers to receive immediate feedback to reinforce effective practice and modify ineffective practice. Without short-term wins, he says, "the pain of change often overwhelms the anticipated long-term benefits" (p. 92). To experienced educators, this concept is nothing new. It's exactly what we strive for by providing students with formative feedback throughout their learning experiences. Meaningful feedback is a powerful motivator and a critical, but often underused, tool for improving professional practice and student learning.

One of the greatest challenges for school leaders is to engage in what Blanchard, Meyer, and Ruhe (2007) call, "spaced repetition," or practice, spaced out over time:

It is difficult to change a belief, send a voter to the ballot box, or influence a person to contribute to charity through one interaction. We do not make people see, feel, or do something in one sentence. An important message almost always requires repetition over time if it's going to have its intended result. (p. 14)

Understanding About Learning

Successful school leaders help teachers change their beliefs about learning. But how does teacher learning and growth occur? A school leader's answer to this question has serious implications on the success of lasting improvements in teaching. Successful school leaders understand learning and how it occurs, and are able to apply their understanding to teacher learning.

In his book, *Thinking for a Living: How to Get Better Performance and Results from Knowledge Workers*, Thomas Davenport (2005) uses a term for those who think for a living. "Knowledge workers," he calls them, like autonomy. He explains that, "thinking for a living engenders thinking for oneself. Knowledge workers are paid for their education, experience and expertise, so it is not surprising that they take offense when someone else rides roughshod over their intellectual territory" (p. 15). If we consider teaching to be a thinking person's job (as it most surely is), we can apply this need for autonomy to teacher learning and growth. A school leader who ignores this need, depriving teachers of any choice or input, insisting that all teachers attend the same one size fits all training, and requiring them to implement the same instructional strategies without any regard for their relevance or applicability, creates push back and resentment from teachers, not improvement and growth.

Respecting the need for teacher autonomy, however, does not mean that teachers are not accountable to clear standards of practice. A leader who is successful in gaining teacher support for change and growth is one who is able to balance the teacher's need for autonomy within a research-based framework for effective practice. That is, teacher autonomy is supported within the boundaries of agreed upon standards of professional practice.

To create a mindset for change, then, school leaders need to believe that teacher learning occurs when the learner is given the opportunity to do the thinking, to create, develop, and make choices that are meaningful and impactful. Designs for teacher learning that are one size fits all, top down, or "drive by" sessions with no meaning or relevancy will not engender support or buy in from any professional staff. This concept about learning and how it occurs not only

applies to teacher learning, it's about *learning, period.* A school leader needs to approach teacher learning and growth based on this very simple understanding.

A Presumption of Continuous Growth for All

> *People rise to high expectations when those they respect have confidence that they will.*
>
> John Goodlad (in Fullan, 2003, p. xi)

The success of a school leader to create a mindset where change, improvement, and continuous growth are the norm is also dependent on how the leader views the instructional capacity of his or her staff. We mentioned earlier that there are many leaders who characterize their staff as being highly skilled, experienced, and dedicated professionals. Do these same leaders also believe their teachers are capable of further growth and development? Is there a presumption of continuous growth and improvement for all teachers? Or are teachers in these schools complacent about their own growth because they demonstrated their competency years ago ("I have tenure, you know!"), and the notion of change or improvement would only signal trouble?

There are, of course, leaders who accept status quo and sidestep their role of improving teacher quality because they lack confidence in their teachers as instructional specialists. These are the leaders who will tell me, "They're really doing the best they can with the students they're given to teach. We can't expect any more from them." Or, leaders may demonstrate what we refer to as leniency with teachers who are great to have around, but may not be contributing much to student learning. "Tom is such a nice guy. He's a real favorite among students and parents." Or, "I can always rely on Heather when I need a volunteer or someone to organize the holiday parties."

To improve the quality of teaching, leaders must believe in the competence and instructional capacity of their staff, and that staff members are *able to learn and grow.* More importantly, leaders must demonstrate through words and deeds an expectation of continuous learning for *all.* We don't accept the notion that some of our students can't learn. We expect continuous learning of all students. Given the complexity and demands of teaching, why would we expect any less from our teachers?

Successful school leaders, able to lead change that improves the quality of teaching, possess certain beliefs and understandings that

make creating the culture of learning possible. Rather than try to convince teachers of the value of change and growth, successful leaders provide teachers with opportunities for short-term wins, enabling them to experience through practice and periodic feedback, the benefits of effective change. Leaders must also understand that learning happens when teachers are involved in doing the mental work, creating and developing ideas and strategies that are meaningful and relevant. Finally, teacher learning and growth occur in an environment that expects continuous learning and growth for all. You don't have to be bad to get better!

Setting the Stage: Defining Who We Are

Capturing the School's History

Creating the culture and establishing norms for teacher learning is the first step to improving teacher quality. What are some of the actions leaders can take to engage teachers in this culture of learning? One of the most important steps in leading change is to acknowledge and honor the contributions and experiences of the past. We've all experienced times when various stakeholders express feelings of "we've been there, done that" or bring skepticism or ill will to the initiative because of similar experiences they've had in the past that didn't turn out so well.

In their book, *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning*, Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (2001) describe a process for moving forward while honoring the past. Whenever I begin working with a new school or district, it is always based on the assumption that there are no blank slates, that we are not starting from scratch. No matter what the current state of affairs may be when changes are initiated, there are always practices, strategies, and traditions that are worth keeping. The "Historygram" process of Conzemius and O'Neill (2001, p. 29) is one that I've used many times when working with faculties about to embark on a new initiative, as a tool to build a bridge between the past and the future. It gives everyone in the school community an opportunity to reflect together in order to learn about the history of the school. The process evolves as a timeline that builds the organizational history through stories that are told by members of the school community beginning with the *tribal elders* and ending with the newly hired. Teachers learn about one another and begin to understand and respect differing points of view as they listen to their colleagues tell stories about past initiatives, major turning

points, successes, and crises. This process helps build a new vision that everyone can share.

There are many ways to create an opportunity for staff members to share the school history. We typically begin by asking the entire group to form a line around the room's perimeter based on the order in which they joined the staff, beginning with the longest standing member. Once the line is formed, we divide the staff into groups based on an era or span of years when they were hired. The chart in Figure 2.1 demonstrates what a sample distribution might look like once teachers were put into groups.

Each group is given a story board or chart paper and asked to name their era. The groups are asked to capture this moment in time by illustrating the storyboard. Guidelines for what to include might be

- Major events or initiatives (capital funds project, the arrival of new technology, changes in school structure or scheduling)
- What was happening in the community
- What was happening in the world
- Traditions, ceremonies, and celebrations that occurred
- What worked: values they want to take into the future

Each group designates a "historian" to describe the contents of the storyboard. After all groups have shared, the entire staff comes together as a whole group to list the themes, patterns, beliefs, and values that

Figure 2.1   Sample Distribution of Staff Members
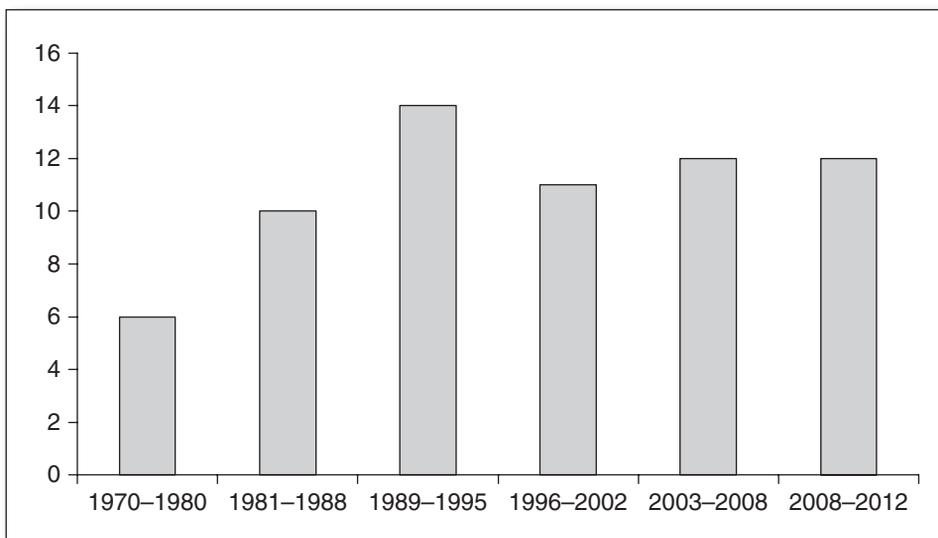
signified what worked. These aspects of the school's history become part of the vision for the school's future. This is an important capstone in the Historygram process. One of the elementary schools we worked with had a group that called themselves "Storytellers." They shared a tradition that began during their era that continues to this day. Each fall, student storytellers in each grade level write about their experiences from the previous year and then visit classrooms to tell their stories to the younger students. This tradition has continued at the school for over a decade, and teachers felt it was something worth keeping. Honoring what has worked in the past helps teachers to step into the unknown future with assurances that they are bringing with them pieces of what's worked and is familiar. No blank slates.

Developing Core Beliefs and Commitments

When was the last time you and your staff members developed a set of core beliefs that represent who you are and what you value as a professional community? Can you name the core beliefs of your organization? Identifying core beliefs and developing commitments to action that support those beliefs is an essential step in the change process.

Belief statements reflect what a group or school community believes to be true about a particular topic or issue. They are important because they express our values and in turn how we choose to act. For example, if I believe that all students can learn and that the quality of teaching is the most important factor impacting student learning, then as a teacher, I will seek out strategies and resources that facilitate learning for all. If, on the other hand, I believe that extrinsic factors, such as family environment or socioeconomic status play the greatest role in a child's ability to learn, I may rely on those factors to explain why that child is failing. Whether they relate to the capacity of students to learn, teacher responsibility for learning, the importance of collaboration and teacher learning, or the link between teaching and learning, belief statements provide powerful testaments that govern behavior and responses. These statements "or informal rules become 'organizational blueprints' that people are obliged to follow" (Deal & Petersen, 2009, p. 67). They are critical to the long term success of any change initiative, because they address the question teachers will ultimately ask, *why are we doing this*?

Let's take a look at a way to engage a group in developing statements that reflect their beliefs and aligned commitments. The example here is taken from the work I've done for over a decade with schools in helping them redesign their teacher evaluation systems. It would be an understatement to say this work is high stakes, bringing

with it strong emotions that require many instances of risk taking and leaps of faith. It is change that begins with establishing a purpose. Why are we making this change? What purpose should teacher evaluation serve? What are our beliefs about teacher evaluation? What are we willing to commit to do in order to ensure that the new system is designed in service of this purpose?

The answers to these questions reveal the group's thinking and beliefs about teacher evaluation. The process of developing belief statements starts with a series of questions intended to help the group think about their views, experiences, and desired outcomes of the initiative. Prior to beginning any work on development of the new process and forms, members of the group are asked to consider what their role will be in the change process and how they will contribute to the work ahead. A sample list of questions is shown in Figure 2.2, Teacher Evaluation Design: Getting Started.

After the members of the group have had an opportunity to think and reflect on the topic, they are presented with research on best practices in teacher evaluation, such as the report by the New Teacher Project, *Teacher Evaluation 2.0* (2010) and *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). Group members read and then share important points from the research with their colleagues. Review of current research is an important step in developing belief statements because the system itself must be guided by best practices.

Next, the group members are asked to develop belief statements. Using sticky notes, each person takes a few moments to respond to the following statement:

> This School District believes that the Teacher Evaluation Process must support . . .

Recording one idea on each sticky note, each person may write three to five ideas about their beliefs. After about five minutes, the group facilitator asks each person to share one idea with the group, telling why they believe it is important.

The next step is for the group to synthesize their thinking on chart paper. Using their sticky notes, they begin to cluster like ideas on the chart, giving each cluster a label. Each label is then written as a belief statement. A sample of Belief Statements and Commitments from Webster Central Schools in Webster, New York is shown in Figure 2.3.

Once the group has developed a set of belief statements, they must consider what actions will support these beliefs. Commitment statements are written in response to the following:

In order to embed these Teacher Evaluation Process beliefs into ongoing professional practice, this School District commits to . . .

Commitments should be written as action statements, representing *what you will do* to support these beliefs. Commitments are written for each belief statement.

These beliefs and commitments will guide the work of the group members as they make decisions about what they will keep doing, stop doing, and start doing in the new system. They reflect the core values and underlying assumptions about the topic and shape the future decisions and actions of the group and staff as a whole. These statements are posted at each subsequent meeting and referenced throughout the change process. Taking the time to develop beliefs and commitment statements is an important step in creating a culture for learning.

Demonstrating Beliefs: Actions of the School Leader

How do successful school leaders demonstrate their beliefs about teaching and learning? How are the core beliefs of the school community reflected in the actions of school leaders? If it's true that actions speak louder than words, what do school leaders *do* to demonstrate these beliefs?

As important as it is for schools to define their beliefs and commitments, it is equally important for school leaders to demonstrate these beliefs through their actions. Tom Sergiovanni describes the responsibility of school leaders to turn beliefs into actions in his essay, "The Virtues of School Leadership": "The heartbeats of leadership and schools are strengthened when word and deed are one" (2005, p. 112). School leaders develop an environment that fosters deep learning, problem solving and higher thinking skills based on their actions rather than words. What actions can school leaders take to create an environment where beliefs are demonstrated through actions each and every day?

Developing Trust and Rapport

As we established earlier in this chapter, changes in behavior usually precede changes in beliefs. Successful school leaders understand

Figure 2.2   Teacher Evaluation System Design: Getting Started

The following questions will help the group members think about the current evaluation process, the purpose and desired outcomes of this work, and the contributions each person will bring to this process. Be ready to share your thoughts!

1. What are some of the best attributes of the present evaluation system that should continue? ("Keep Doing")

2. What aspects of the present system could be improved, adjusted in some way, or added? ("Stop/Start Doing")

3. What expertise, insights, and effort are you committing to this process in order to make the experience and the end products successful?

4. When you think about the kinds of feedback you have received about your performance, or that you have given to another educator, what makes that kind of information useful or not useful? What must be included in the evaluation system that will trigger continuous growth?

5. What are some of the reasons for making changes in the teacher evaluation process, and what are some messages that staff will need to know about those reasons?

the importance of developing trust and rapport with staff as a prerequisite to changing behavior. As teachers are asked to change their instructional practice and try something new, they need to know that they will be supported by their leaders and that mistakes they make along the way will be seen as steps in the learning process.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) examined the conditions that foster trust in schools. The actions of the school principal, they found, were among the key factors in developing trust:

> Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. Effective principals couple these behaviors with a compelling school vision and behavior that clearly seeks to advance the vision. This consistency between words and actions affirms their personal integrity. (p. 43–44)

Teachers are the first to recognize the difference between school leaders who merely talk the talk, and those who walk the walk through their actions and deeds. One way that leaders demonstrate support for staff members is by encouraging them to develop their own leadership qualities and skills. Leaders send a strong message to teachers when they invite them to lead the learning with colleagues.

Figure 2.3   Teacher Evaluation

Belief/Commitment Statements	
Beliefs	**Aligned Commitments**
The Webster Central School district believes that teacher evaluation procedures must support improved student learning through:	**In order to embed these Teacher Evaluation Process beliefs into ongoing professional practice, this School District commits to:**
A Collaborative Culture based on trust, transparency and respect	• Open dialogue focused on instruction • Opportunities for sharing and celebration of strengths • Opportunities for professional collaboration within & outside of WCSD • Continuous growth within Professional Learning Communities
Research-based instructional practices supported by continuous professional growth and learning	• Utilizing the Framework for Teaching and accompanying rubrics as the agreed upon definition of effective teaching • Providing differentiated opportunities and resources to engage teachers in professional learning
Transparent procedures that are clear, consistent, reliable and evidence based	• Provide teachers with electronic access to the procedures & tools for evaluation • Using multiple measures in determining teach effectiveness • Respectful collaborative processes that allow for an evidence-based appraisal of teacher performance
Reflective practices	• Opportunities for collegial conversations that review evidence/artifacts of teaching and student learning • Embedding reflective practices in professional learning experiences

Rather than leading the learning as a sage on the stage, successful leaders step aside and lead by participating in learning alongside the teachers as a guide on the side.

Step Aside and Lead: Creating Opportunities for Learning

Leaders who believe in the capacity of their staff demonstrate this belief by creating opportunities for teachers to seek help from

one another; share materials, resources, and strategies; experiment with new approaches to teaching content or skills; and contribute to decisions that impact their daily work. Common planning time, faculty meetings, department or grade level meetings, and conference days are regarded as protected opportunities for teacher learning. School leaders who understand how teacher learning occurs and believe in their need for autonomy provide teachers the opportunity to lead and participate in activities that are meaningful and relevant.

More importantly, they recognize the need to make public the contributions and to share the success stories of teachers. As Robert Evans (1996) wrote in his book, *The Human Side of Change,* "The single-best, low-cost, high-leverage way to improve performance, morale and the climate for change is to dramatically increase the levels of meaningful recognition for—and among—educators." He went on to say that we have sorely neglected the need for adults to be recognized and celebrated for their accomplishments and that we "shower recognition on pupils but deny it to adults" (p. 254–256).

Leaders who walk the walk of their beliefs about teaching and learning are those we mentioned earlier who can most often be found in the classroom, observing, listening, and learning. They don't wait for a spare moment to present itself to follow up with the teacher whose classroom they've visited. They intentionally seek out the teacher and engage them in conversation, reflection and professional dialogue. These conversations may only last a few minutes, but they send a powerful message to teachers about the leader's role in supporting quality instruction.

Leaders who demonstrate their beliefs through actions attend professional development alongside their teachers. They don't watch from the sidelines; they join a group of teachers and participate as a learner. They demonstrate the importance of continuous learning by choosing to participate in learning rather than using the time to finish up administrative tasks. They willingly participate in challenging learning because they are driven by a growth mindset that sees challenge as an opportunity to grow rather than fail.

Key Points About Creating a Culture of Learning

School leaders today are faced with challenging the status quo. The Lake Wobegon effect has created a culture of nice where all teaching

is rated above average. As a result, improving teacher quality has not been viewed as a priority in many schools.

The current landscape, however, is changing, with new demands on teachers and school leaders to evaluate the quality of teaching based on multiple measures, including measures of student learning. One of the results of looking at teacher quality through this new lens will be increased levels of feedback and criticism around instructional practice. Successful school leaders will be able to help teachers change existing mindsets that fear constructive criticism and feedback and create school environments where continuous learning for all is a cultural norm.

School leaders who are successful in creating a culture of learning are propelled by certain dispositions and beliefs about teaching and learning. They demonstrate their beliefs by honoring the school's history and developing core beliefs about teaching and learning that drive commitments to action. Leaders who believe that improving the quality of teaching is their most important responsibility make choices that demonstrate this belief. They regularly visit classrooms, engage in collegial conversations, and provide teachers with opportunities to grow and learn from each other. They lead with a growth mindset, acknowledging the risks and challenges inherent in learning but more importantly, acknowledging its rewards. They are not threatened by impending changes to the school landscape because they believe in the capacity of the teachers to grow and learn. A school leader who demonstrates these beliefs through action creates a culture of learning for all—leaders, teachers, and, ultimately, for students.

What do school leaders need to know about staff, about effective practice, about learning, in order to make the most of a culture of learning? In the next chapter, we'll examine the understandings and skills that that are central to instructional leadership and improving the quality of teaching.

Putting Words Into Action

Reflecting on Your Current State

• Can you recall a time when an experience you had changed your beliefs about teaching or learning? It may have been a conversation you had with a teacher or student, a project you organized or participated in, a course you took (possibly alongside the teachers), a class you taught, a new resource you discovered, or even a place you visited. How might this experience be used in your role as a leader to help others understand that practice drives beliefs?

• What are the core beliefs of your organization? How are they communicated to staff members? When was the last time they were reviewed? Can you think of an example when you referred to the core beliefs in a conversation with staff?

Action Tools

- Capture the History
  - o Use the process described in Figure 2.4 to capture your school's traditions and history.

- Promote Professional Reading.
  - o One of the ways to encourage professional learning is to provide access to current research and articles that are available online. Invite staff to engage in professional reading by sending a copy or a link to the Table of Contents page from one or two educational journals to teachers and professional staff members each month such as the *American Educational Research Journal, Journal of Staff Development*, or *Educational Leadership.* You may even include a recommendation of an article you've read to spur interest and awareness of a relevant topic.

Figure 2.4   A Process for Capturing School History

Where, When, and Why
    Schedule a time and place for the faculty to participate in this activity. It is important to communicate the purpose of this meeting to all participants. The meeting will be an opportunity for staff members to come together to reflect and understand the patterns, cycles, and trends of the collective organizational history of the school. The purpose is to understand where the organization has been in the past and to create a shared vision for the future.
The Process:

    1.   Before the meeting begins, tape a long piece of paper to one wall (or possibly around the room) and draw a time line from one end of the paper to the other, ending with an arrow and a cloud marked "Future". Do not label the timeline until the meeting starts.

    2.   As the meeting begins, explain that telling stories about the past is a way to help schools understand where they have been and to understand where they are going in the future. Acknowledge that there are many events in the school history that teachers who were hired in recent years may be unaware of. This process will capture those events, creating a historical memory of the organization's culture.

3.   Ask who has been with the organization the longest and when that person was hired. Record the year he or she started at the beginning of the time line and invite the person to stand in front of that "era" on the time line. You may also invite this tribal elder to tell a short anecdote about what the school was like back then.

4.   Invite the rest of the staff to form a line along the wall in the order of when they were first hired by the district, starting from earliest to most recent. If a number of people joined the organization in the same year, have them stand one behind another, with the most senior person at the front of the line. For years when no one was hired (an interesting part of organizational history in itself), make spaces between the lines. In this way, a human histogram forms. As members line up, the years are recorded on the chart.

5.   After everyone has lined up, group the years into eras which are usually based on a five to ten year span, depending on the number of people who occupy those years. The sample in Figure 2.1 has six eras.

6.   Members of each era receive chart paper and discuss the following questions:

- What would be an appropriate name for this era? (For example, "The Birth of Technology")
- What was the culture like? What tribal stories circulated? What symbols and ceremonies were important?
- What were the major initiatives?
- What were the goals of each initiative?
- How was the success of the initiatives measured? How did you know that you were making progress? What was the basis for shifting direction?
- What values from the past do you want to bring into the future?

The group decides on a name for the era and then captures the story about their era on chart paper.

7.   Volunteers from each group are invited to tell the rest of the group the story about that era. As the stories unfold, ask participants to identify patterns, trends, and cycles. Look for underlying assumptions that people are making about why people behaved as they did in the past, why changes were initiated, and what the goals were in each era. These questions inevitably lead to a rich conversation and a deep understanding about the organization's history, an important step in learning how mental models have been formed and how they have shaped actions.

8.   Once the process has been completed, ask the group to consider the following questions:

- *Keep Doing:* What values and behaviors from the past will we take with us into the future?
- *Start Doing:* What promises can we make to one another to better fulfill our purpose? What do we need to do as a group, team, or as individuals to move forward?
- *Stop Doing:* What behaviors, beliefs, or assumptions can we leave in the past?