THE MAIN IDEA
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The Influential School Leader:
Inspiring Teachers, Students, and Families Through Social and Organizational Psychology

By Craig Murphy and John D'Auria (Routledge, 2021)

S.O.S.   (A Summary of the Summary)

The main ideas of the book:

> ~ School leaders are increasingly finding themselves confronted with complex challenges and issues in schools.
> ~ With a refreshing approach to school leadership, this book incorporates lessons from social and organizational psychology to help leaders positively influence their schools.

Why I chose this book:
As we've seen over the past year, school and district leaders are facing tremendous challenges and they don't always have the tools or guidance to handle these changes with grace. There have been more intense and deeply personal emotions in connection with the recent enormous changes than I can remember from ever before in schools.

What a great idea for an experienced educator (former teacher, principal, and superintendent) to team up with a professor of school psychology to write this book now.

I appreciate that the authors draw from the field of organizational and social psychology to give leaders insight into the human side of change – a perspective we definitely need. As they write, "People are not motivated to change their behavior simply by acquiring new knowledge. Acquired knowledge must be integrated into their emotional senses in order to make transformational change."

We are facing so many *complex challenges* right now; take a look at the authors' framework to help you better understand and address those problems!

The Scoop   (In this summary you will learn…)

✓ Part I introduces helpful lenses with which to view complex problems.
> Have you considered the perspective of the district? School leaders? Teachers and staff? Parents and families?
> Have you look at the different levels of the problem – the behaviors, feelings, and values that underlie it?

✓ Part II describes the four conditions school leaders must have in place to support any substantive change.
> Does your school have psychological safety, a sense of belonging, open communication, and a spirit of experimentation?

✓ Part III shows how to apply the framework for and includes a case study of returning to school after COVID-19

Introduction

In the future, leaders will need to rely on *influence* more than outright *power* to address change. Commands won't lead to deep changes. Why is this the case? Because true change involves much more than acquiring new knowledge, it involves *emotions*. Today we want educators to do more than simply comply – we want and need them to embrace the change, commit to it, and own it.

To help leaders prepare for this, the authors draw on knowledge from social and organizational psychology. They integrate principles of both fields into a framework to help leaders better understand and address the big changes that are occurring in schools.

Rather than sharing a rigid set of steps for leaders to follow, the authors share the conditions and skill sets leaders need to prepare for successful change. It is becoming increasingly clear that school and district leaders need to develop strengths in *nimble learning* and *adaptability* if they are to thrive in tomorrow's schools. Change is complex and the principles from social and organizational psychology provide a new lens and a new approach to managing these issues more effectively.

The authors have created a *framework for change* involves a combination of lenses and strategies that help educational leaders to anticipate and prevent obstacles to school improvements. The book is organized in the following way:

> Part I introduces helpful lenses with which to view complex problems.
> Part II describes the four conditions leaders must have in place to support any substantive change.
> Part III shows how this framework plays out in practice and includes a sample case study.

Part I – Improving Your Vision: Using Two Lenses to Better View Complex Problems

Before leaders start to *address* complex problems, it is vital that they take the time to first *understand* them. This section introduces **two lenses** that are extremely important in helping leaders better understand problems from different perspectives.

The 1ˢᵗ Lens – *Four Distinct Perspectives*

The first lens leaders should consider in helping them to better understand a complex problem is referred to as "the four distinct perspectives." Imagine a scenario in which 100 teachers received letters informing them that their contracts would not be renewed for the upcoming school year. This is a complex issue. The idea of this lens is that in order for educational leaders to fully understand a complex problem (like the termination notices), they must look at it from the perspectives of the following four groups whose perspectives almost always impact an issue:

> • **Senior Management** – Superintendents and other district-wide leaders
> • **Middle Management** – Principals and K-12 directors
> • **Line Workers** – Teachers
> • **Customers/Clients** – Students, families, and members of the community

Typically, *superintendents* experience a deep sense of accountability for the larger system. *Principals* are torn between the needs of teachers and families, yet feel accountable to their administrative team. While they do hold power, they often feel powerless because they need permission to act. *Teachers* frequently feel vulnerable because there is much over which they have no control. Finally, *families and students* often feel neglected.

While each of these perspectives is important in resolving an issue, we often experience "spatial blindness" – that is, an inability to see the other points of view. That is, **our *vision* is limited**. This book is about maximizing our influence as leaders and one of the keys to this is understanding the three other perspectives.

The problem is that we act based on the assumption that everyone shares the same information and experiences, and they do not. If we want to foster collaboration around problems, we need to find ways for people to *share their own perspectives*. One way to do this is by a "listening in stereo" exercise that helps to surface the different perspectives. For example, one group of principals and one group of district leaders might each, on their own, discuss this question:

What do you want your colleagues who are [district leaders/principals] to better understand about your work and the challenges you face that you think they don't see or understand?

Then each group presents their thinking while the other group listens "in stereo" for both the *content* and the *emotions* of the other group and summarizes what they hear to ensure they understood it accurately. An exercise like this helps to surface perspectives from one of the other four groups and is useful in helping to understand complex problems.

There are two lessons from social psychology that help to explain why it is so important that leaders delve into the four perspectives before proceeding to address problems or create change.

The first is that people tend to create mental categories or **schema** as a way to organize information. For example, when we see a dark alley at night, we automatically avoid it because we associate it with lack of safety. This can be helpful, but it can also lead to stereotypes and biases which leads to an "us" and "them" mentality. For example, teachers may develop the in-group bias that they hold the most important role since they directly teach students all day. They instantly empathize with other teachers since this is something they all share. However, this may also mean that they lump people from *other groups* together and assume that all superintendents are the same and, for example, have plenty of time while they don't even have time to go to the bathroom.

The second concept from social psychology that can help us understand why examining these four perspectives is so important is **confirmation bias**. This is when we pay attention to or seek out information that confirms what we already believe and ignore any information that contradicts what we believe. For example, when teachers see administrators acting in ways that confirm how they typically think of them, they take this in. But when administrators act in ways that, say, put teachers' needs first, they may ignore this. The goal with considering the four perspectives is to *actively seek out* information and perspectives from different stakeholders that will contradict our biases.

Overall, the importance of using the lens of the four perspectives is key – going out of your way to determine how different stakeholders feel about and are impacted by the issue at hand may be the difference between a successful and unsuccessful initiative.

The 2nd Lens – *Seeing the System in 3D*

The second lens that can help school leaders better understand problems and lead through change is the "three dimensions." Every problem can be seen through three dimensions and all dimensions should be considered in addressing the problem:
1. *Surface-level dimension:* Behaviors and actions
2. *Below-the-surface dimension:* Feelings and attitudes
3. *System dimension:* Beliefs and values

1. *Surface-level dimension*
The easiest and most visible way that leaders see problems is through the behaviors and actions that people exhibit. Whether teachers are arriving late, a student never has a healthy snack, or students sit in segregated groups in the cafeteria – there are concrete, observable behaviors that alert leaders to the problem. If they address those problems with surface-level interventions, they may see immediate and concrete results. For example, a principal might require that teachers sign in to monitor their lateness, provide a basket of healthy snacks, and assign seats in the cafeteria so students with different backgrounds sit together. But none of these solutions addresses the *root* of the problem. None of the solutions will deeply *influence* the people involved. It doesn't mean these solutions are useless – they send a clear message that the behavior is unacceptable – they are just unlikely to have lasting results on their own.

2. *Below-the-surface dimension*
Examining a problem's surface-level dimension is a good way for leaders to *start* to address the "what" of the problem. But to be truly *influential leaders*, they need to turn to the "why" – that is, the below-the-surface dimension. The best way for leaders to understand the "why" behind people's behaviors is to engage in conversations with them to understand how they genuinely feel. Without surfacing people's true feelings, staff may publicly comply with a directive, but then still privately disagree with the change. Giving people an opportunity to air their feelings helps everyone understand the below-the-surface factors that are impacting the problem. For example, in the case of students self-segregating in the cafeteria, students of color might share that they feel more comfortable and relaxed interacting with students from their own background and white students might say they do not feel close to students of color because they don't have the opportunity to interact with them because their classes are tracked. Clearly, assigning seats in the cafeteria wouldn't be sufficient to address these underlying feelings.

3. *System dimension*
The system dimension includes the values and beliefs of the entire system – for schools, this is the district. While a leader can observe behaviors (*surface-level dimension*) and ask stakeholder groups about their feelings (*below-the-surface dimension*), it is much more complex to understand the system dimension of a challenge or problem. In the cafeteria example above, the students shared that they lacked comfort interacting with each other but it was the district that created the system in which classes that were supposed to be leveled by achievement ended up as racially segregated. This was clearly a big factor in the larger problem of the segregated cafeteria. It is much more challenging to surface the beliefs and values of an entire organization to better understand the system's role in causing the problem because it involves all four stakeholder groups from the 1st lens (district leaders, principals, teachers, students/families).

While it may seem overwhelming to approach a problem by examining the four perspectives and the three dimensions, it is worth the effort to surface this data in order to make more informed decisions and come up with more long-lasting solutions. When educational leaders have a deeper more layered understanding of problems, they will be better able to diagnose them. *Understanding the problem* is the first step in creating change. The next step involves *creating the four conditions* that enable any change or initiative to flourish.

Part II – The Four Conditions Needed for Complex Change

1st Condition – *Balancing Psychological Safety with Accountability*

4 Conditions for Change			
1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

Groups simply can't function without psychological safety. Professor Amy Edmondson at Harvard Business School says that it is psychological safety that allows us to adapt and act with nimbleness in a quickly-changing world. But psychological safety does not mean that members are free to do whatever they want. They must also take responsibility for their mistakes so the organization can *learn from them*. To see true change, leaders need to establish a culture in which psychological safety is balanced with accountability.

Edmondson defines psychological safety as follows: "Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution." If you think about it, teachers will only try new techniques and innovate if leaders have created a safe climate in which it's OK to fail and try again. Think about the incredible transformation that was required by the COVID-19 crisis. The teachers who were best equipped to handle this challenge were those who came from a culture that did *not* expect them to be perfect but instead prepared them to feel safe even in the face of mistakes.

Assess Psychological Safety

How can you assess whether your staff experience psychological safety? You can use a survey to ask directly, or, if you are concerned that some may not answer honestly, you can observe for it in staff interactions and meetings. Consider using the following:

Psychological safety survey questions for educators	Observations of psychological safety in meetings and interactions
(Rate each from 10 agree/frequently to 1 disagree/never or answer the question.)	
1. If you make a mistake at school it is held against you.	1. All staff members share their voices during staff discussions.
2. Staff at this school are able to bring up problems and issues.	2. Participant engagement is balanced across staff members.
3. Educators here sometimes reject others who are different.	3. Disagreements frequently take place during staff meetings.
4. It is safe to take a risk at this school.	4. Mistakes and failures are frequently discussed at meetings.
5. At this school, it is difficult to ask others for help.	5. Staff frequently contribute to staff meeting agendas.
6. My unique skills and talents are valued at this school.	6. Feelings and emotions are part of staff meeting discussions.

Become Comfortable with Cognitive Dissonance and Disagreements

When there is a strong sense of psychological safety, not only do influential leaders expect disagreements, they *encourage* them. They facilitate and participate in challenging conversations. For example, after one PD session the principal asked for feedback. One teacher said, "These activities are overwhelming and do not feel important. We have given up a lot of our planning time and I'm not sure what the benefits are of this PD." This was a crucial point for the principal who slowly responded, "That must have been really hard for you to share. As a human being, it's also really hard for me to hear. But I want you to know that I really appreciate your courage and willingness to give me honest and constructive feedback. We now can discuss these different perspectives. Thank you." This response showed that disagreement was not just tolerated, but encouraged and that psychological safety does not mean everyone always agrees.

The principal experienced what social psychologists call **cognitive dissonance** – discomfort due to holding two inconsistent beliefs simultaneously. Here the principal believed the PD was important but also wanted to meet the needs of the teachers. In schools with a strong sense of psychological safety, staff learn that cognitive dissonance is expected and in fact required for the school to improve.

Use Feedback Loops

Sometimes in schools there is a high level of psychological safety, but there is no critical feedback or challenging conversations. Amy Edmondson calls this the **Comfort Zone** – when psychological safety is high but standards for professional practice are low. In such a setting, improvement cannot happen. To address this, leaders must develop two-way feedback channels. That is, principals provide feedback to educators (on their teaching and work with students) and educators provide feedback to leaders (on their leadership). This feedback loop helps to support continuous improvement. To enhance this process, leaders should work to ensure that the focus is on student learning, not blaming, and that teachers and leaders increase their comfort with both giving and receiving feedback.

Create a Brave Space, not a Safe Space

Again, as has been emphasized in this chapter, psychological safety does *not* mean a culture of nice. Instead, leaders must create a brave space that balances psychological safety with accountability for making mistakes and learning from them in order to improve.

Safe Spaces	Brave Spaces
Privilege politeness	Privilege honesty and authenticity
Value comfort when discussing challenging issues	Accept discomfort as a natural part of difficult conversations
Tend to defend and deflect	Value risk taking, vulnerability, and challenge
Do not actively prepare participants for difficult conversations	Prepare staff to be able to handle difficult conversations

4 Conditions for Change			
1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

The importance of creating belonging when leaders work to improve their school cannot be overstated. Staff feel they belong when they can answer in the affirmative to these questions:

• Am I valued here?   • Does my voice count?   • Do I have a future with these people?

Assess Belonging

A sense of belonging helps staff feel the trust needed for them to learn, grow, experiment, and make errors. When they feel they belong, staff are more likely to remain at the school, engage in activities, and recruit others to work at the school. Without a sense of belonging staff are more likely to experience resentment, divisiveness, and burnout. How does a leader know when staff feel a sense of cohesiveness? Belonging cues may include proximity, eye contact, energy, turn taking, body language, attention, and the inclusion of everyone in the group. In addition to these cues, leaders might assess staff belonging at the school by observing for the following:

• What is the daily attendance rate for staff?   • How often do we hear from *all* voices at a staff meeting?
• What is the retention rate for staff?   • How often do staff recruit others to work here?
• What stories do staff tell about our work culture?   • How often do staff offer support to one another?

An even more empowering exercise is for leaders to reflect on *their own* efforts to increase staff belonging:
• Do I provide growth opportunities for staff that meet their needs?
• Do I plan meetings that invite engagement, respect staff time, seek staff perspective, and listen to ideas and feedback?
• How do I support staff in following through on recommendations for their growth and improvement?
• What am I doing to ensure staff feel appreciated and connected to the school so they will want to remain here?
• What am I doing to recognize, support, and encourage staff collegiality?

Examine Norms as Indicators of Belonging

In addition to what was included above, both explicit and implicit social norms give an indication of the level of belonging. Some teachers aren't even aware of the social norms at their school. Social norms are "the implicit or explicit rules a group has for the acceptable behaviors, values, and beliefs of its members." *Explicit* norms might include items like the following:

• Share the floor during school meetings   • Listen respectfully   • Reserve judgment   • Assume good intentions

However, some *implicit* norms might be undermining the progress and growth of the group. For example, there might be an implicit norm that "everyone must get along." This might sound admirable, but it prevents diverging opinions and perspectives which are needed for growth. To address this problem, it is important for leaders to create both *technical* and *adaptive norms*. Unfortunately, leaders tend to rely more heavily on the more visible *technical* norms like starting and ending meetings on time or the process to create the agenda. In contrast, *adaptive* norms are more about engagement and conflict. Examples include:

• We are willing to engage in conflict and stay engaged to resolve issues.
• We will lean in to discomfort.
• We will take responsibility for identifying what is troubling us and sharing it with the appropriate person.
• We will listen for the quiet voice and reach out to those more reluctant to speak in groups.

A simple way to hold the group accountable for these norms is to ask everyone to respond to a question such as, "To what degree did I follow the group's norms in today's meeting on a scale of 1-10?"

Strengthen Belonging, not Conformity

Creating adaptive norms like the ones above is one way to balance people's sense of belonging with accountability for learning, growth, and change. Otherwise, social psychology shows us that people tend to just agree with the group and value getting along. Psychology experiments show that people overwhelmingly prefer to conform to the group rather than speak up, even if speaking up involves telling the truth. This has negative repercussions in education. Imagine a team meeting to discuss whether a student might have a disability. If the teacher with the *most* experience with the student believes he *does* have a disability, but she speaks last and everyone else says the child has *no* disability, it harms the student if this teacher does not speak up.

It is common that we see a "culture of nice" in schools in which educators do not feel comfortable critiquing their peers. You can detect a "culture of nice" when the following occurs during professional conversations:

• Teachers hesitate to question their own or each other's practices assumptions, and beliefs.
• Teachers only share successful student work to avoid judgment. If they do, they make excuses for the underperformance.

Adaptive norms like these can help – teachers will engage in critical, honest feedback; teachers will recognize when the conversation has turned to "nice"; and teachers will focus on the learning dilemma not the teachers. Overall, creating a sense of belonging is complex because it does not just mean that everyone feels good and gets along. Leaders need to balance helping staff develop a sense of belonging with strategies that ensure diverging opinions will still be accepted and encouraged so everyone can grow and learn.

3rd Condition – *Fostering Open and Honest Communication*

4 Conditions for Change			
1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

The third condition necessary for change is ***open and honest communication***. Without it, leaders make decisions and shape policies based on limited data and a limited understanding of the challenges they face. Unfortunately, in many schools, teachers are afraid to share their opinions because they fear it will jeopardize their reputation, relationships, or job security. Below are specific actions leaders can take to bring about change by encouraging open, honest dialogue between and among all stakeholders.

Minimize the Nondiscussables: There are the critical but "taboo" topics that teachers and staff are anxious or afraid to discuss openly (but often discuss privately with colleagues or friends). Common *nondiscussables* include the leadership style of principals, inconsistent treatment of teachers and staff, conflicts with teacher unions, and issues related to race. The authors believe that the healthiest schools bring these "taboo" subjects out in the open. For this reason, leaders must be willing to seek out and discuss these "hidden" concerns in order to improve conditions and foster trust and safety in the school community.

Recognize Power Differentials: Staff also may not openly communicate due to ***power differentials***, i.e., they feel their ideas will not be valued by those in a higher position or those with more social capital. For example, a new teacher may be reluctant to express curricular concerns with the department chair or an IT worker may hesitate to share security concerns with a superintendent. Leaders must empower *everyone* to speak so they can get needed information to make sound decisions, create change, and improve the school.

Improve School Meetings: Each school meeting presents an opportunity to shape communication practices. Leaders must be willing to ask: *How are meetings typically structured? Who develops the agenda? Do staff contribute freely (if not, what holds them back)? Do staff leave meetings feeling valued and heard?* Sadly, teachers' responses typically reveal unequal power dynamics. School meetings are usually controlled by a few team members and those in authority speak the most. Often, it feels like the "real decisions" are made before the meeting even begins. When teachers *are* given the chance to discuss solutions, follow-through is lacking.

The authors believe the key to improving school meetings (and ultimately communication), is to establish and reinforce positive assumptions/beliefs about open communication to reduce the likelihood that staff will withhold relevant ideas and concerns.

Assumptions that Foster Open Communication	
• We all have information to share.	• People can disagree with us and still have pure motives.
• Each of us sees things that others do not.	• Differences are opportunities for learning (not *disruptions*).
• We may be contributing to the problem by staying silent or only voicing opinions to people who have no control in changing it.	

Conversely, there are many negative assumptions that *discourage* open dialogue. These unspoken assumptions not only prevent open communication, but also limit the flow of information and block access to critical data. Sadly, the authors say these assumptions (below) are common in schools and are reinforced by "repeated, hostile interactions between leaders and those who disagree with them." We must be willing to challenge these assumptions to improve.

Assumptions that Discourage Open Communication	
• I am right; those who disagree with me are wrong.	• Those who disagree with me have questionable motives.
• I understand the situation and those who disagree do not.	• I am not contributing to the problem.

Embrace Multiple Perspectives: A key step in creating change is recognizing that all viewpoints matter. When leaders get stuck in the "one of us is right, and it is probably me" rut, it is difficult to fully understand or address challenging issues. The goal is to shift away from the thinking that others are either "with us or against us" which often dominates school (and political) climates. This isn't always easy! It takes practice to express genuine curiosity about others' ideas (especially when they run counter to our own), but this curiosity is essential to growth. When a leader can capture and summarize the concerns of group members, she gains trust and confidence. She is then in a better position to engage in open and honest dialogue where every member of the group feels comfortable sharing ideas.

Avoid *Groupthink*: *Groupthink* occurs when groups make decisions based on their desire to *conform*; these groups typically value harmony more than facts or critical thought. *Groupthink* can lead to *self-censorship* – stifling any opinion that differs from the larger group. It can also lead to the *common knowledge effect* where group members spend most of their time discussing things everyone knows rather than sharing unique information that may help resolve the issue. Consider this example: When a special education team gathered to discuss their continued use of retention for struggling readers, everyone agreed that retention was helpful. However, when one member shared that most research on retention did *not* support reading development, others dismissed the comment in favor of their own personal anecdotes. They ultimately voted to maintain their use of retention despite the new knowledge that was shared.

To remedy groupthink, leaders must encourage staff to share independent ideas. Teachers can privately brainstorm potential solutions *before* discussing them as a group. Leaders might also ask individuals with unique knowledge to share insights to the larger group so they can make more informed decisions. Or they might find ways for individuals to share their ideas anonymously.

4th Condition – *Encouraging Experimentation*

4 Conditions for Change			
1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

The fourth and final condition necessary for change is *encouraging experimentation*. Ideally, we want educators to view their work as a series of experiments designed to improve instruction and maximize student achievement. This chapter looks at the beliefs and actions that support a more robust, systematic approach to experimentation.

Help Teachers See Themselves as "Scientists of Learning"

Encouraging experimentation is based on the belief that school improvement, like scientific inquiry, is an **iterative process**: with each new lesson or unit, teachers make calculated changes to improve teaching and learning. Teachers are, in essence, "scientists of learning." Every time teachers design lessons to meet students' needs, they are involved in experimentation. They create lesson plans, teach, assess student learning, discuss results with colleagues, and adjust the next lesson based on the data. Our goal as leaders is to help every teacher value this process of discovery and see themselves as capable *scientists*.

We can help teachers become stronger "scientists of learning" by reminding them that every lesson is, in fact, an *experiment* – and an opportunity for improvement. John Hattie's work reminds us that effective teachers assess their impact in the classroom; this is in effect "being a scientist of learning." Teachers must also understand that even with careful planning, there is no guarantee the lesson will work for every student (and there are many variables that impact student success). Unfortunately, many educators start with the assumption that 100% of their students should be successful every time. This is unrealistic and dangerous: Teachers who fail to see the benefits of trial and error – and believe perfection is the only indicator of success – have a difficult time trying new things. The risk of failure is simply too great.

It's telling that when the authors shared with educators a story about a failed cancer drug trial and asked them to predict the outcome, most teachers guessed that either "nothing happened" or the scientists got fired! No one predicted what actually happened – that the researchers published their findings to help others learn from their challenges. Leaders must help teachers and staff move beyond this fear of failure and encourage them to learn from both successes and setbacks. When educators learn to analyze what worked, what didn't, and why, they are able to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement.

Avoid "Solutionitis"

The emerging field of *improvement science* emphasizes the importance of *experimentation* in school improvement. The chief architect of improvement science, Anthony Bryk, believes schools fail to improve because they do not take time to diagnose problems or take a calculated approach to solve them. Too often, education leaders suffer from "**solutionitis**" – the tendency to jump to a solution without understanding the complexity of the problem. He uses the Gates Foundation's 2-billion-dollar program to restructure schools as an example: Despite their costly investment, the foundation withdrew after seven years because it failed to change student outcomes.

Learn From Failures

Bryk believes schools can learn valuable lessons about improvement from other industries, including the medical field. Despite years of research, medical science has yet to discover a cure for cancer, but each new published study – *whether it succeeded or failed* – provides the community with valuable insights into what did and did not work. What educators do with the knowledge gained from failed lessons or failed initiatives is equally important.

In order to improve, Bryk believes schools must embrace what other industries already understand, which is that "improving productivity is not about incentivizing individual effort…or even enhancing individual competence. Rather, it is about designing better processes for carrying out common work problems and creating more agile mechanisms for reacting to novel situations." He says that "in high-performing organizations, failures are not a reason to cast blame, but an occasion to learn. Data are not blunt instruments for imposing sanctions or offering rewards; they are resources to deepen understanding and focus efforts for improvement."

Foster a Growth Mindset

In order to embrace *experimentation*, educators must possess a growth mindset. They must give themselves permission to make mistakes, learn from them, and improve upon them. Educators with a growth mindset do not see setbacks as a reason to pull back or blame others. They see challenges as opportunities to try new approaches. Schools that fail to embrace a growth mindset have a difficult time solving their most challenging issues because they are less likely to believe that they can change (or they get bogged down in blaming others for the problem).

On the other hand, schools that believe they can change are much more willing to put in extra time and effort to achieve ambitious goals. Schools that desire change must therefore encourage a growth mindset in each group of stakeholders. For example, principals should observe teachers and provide feedback that specifically names the strategies that led to greater success as a way to influence their mindset. In the same way, superintendents should provide principals with relevant feedback and support. Consistent improvement can only occur in safe, open environments where collaboration and experimentation are nurtured and valued.

Part III: Applying the Framework

THE INFLUENTIAL SCHOOL LEADER FRAMEWORK
The 4 Perspectives
*** Superintendent *** Principal *** Teachers and Staff *** Students and Families ***
The 3 Dimensions
Surface-Level: behaviors and actions — *Below-the-Surface: feelings and emotions* — *System: values and beliefs*
The 4 Conditions for Change
Safety — *Belonging* — *Communication* — *Experimentation*

Moving From Theory to Practice: The Nine Steps to Improvement

To help leaders apply the framework, the authors have developed a step-by-step process. The nine steps below provide a pathway for stakeholders to analyze complex issues and develop strategies that are owned by the full faculty. This process can be used to develop new approaches to most school challenges.

Step 1: Establish a Small, Diverse Committee. The optimal group size is eight as it allows for two representatives from each perspective (district, school leaders, staff, student and families). Diversity should be a priority. Diversity includes voices from different departments, grade levels, genders, and races. It also includes voices from different "sides" of a dividing issue, since the goal is to lean into differences and learn from them. Failure to prioritize diversity diminishes faculty buy-in and overall impact.

Step 2: Establish Norms and Structures. The committee should set norms to establish a sense of safety and belonging before any conflicts arise. The authors suggest that groups discuss the "Assumptions that Foster Open Communication" from earler (such as, *We all have information to share*). They also recommend ending each meeting with an anonymous electronic survey to assess how the group is functioning and if members feel the norms are being followed. The results can be shared at the next meeting.

Step 3: Develop a Shared Understanding of the Problem. Before diving into further discussions, the group should clearly define the problem and write down their agreed-upon definition for the group to review (i.e., create a "problem statement"). Often this discussion brings up valuable insights. For example, when a committee met to discuss school reopening plans after months of online learning in the pandemic, they found that many teachers were afraid to tackle new technology issues. This "fear of incompetence" emerged as an important element the group needed to address in their school re-opening plans.

Step 4: Verify the Problem Statement. To ensure the definition of the problem accurately reflects diverse perspectives, the problem statement should be shared with the full faculty for input. This gesture can increase the faculty's commitment to the process and also to the strategies they will be asked to implement.

Step 5: Consider External Factors. With the problem statement in hand, the group can begin to identify external factors that contribute to the issue, such as parent involvement, student reactions, etc. The goal is not to "place blame," but to uncover how different groups or situations contribute to the problem in different ways.

Step 6: Reflect on Internal Factors. After reviewing the external factors, the group should switch focus to internal factors by having members ask themselves: *How might I be contributing to the problem?* This can be a difficult discussion as it tests the psychological safety of the group, but groups that can acknowledge their own contributions have a better chance of success. An anonymous survey at the end of the meeting may be helpful for people who are nervous to share their answers face to face.

Step 7: Map the Contribution System. In this step, the group creates a visual organizer to represent all of the internal and external factors that contribute to the issue. This "map" should be shared with the larger faculty for feedback to ensure every factor is considered before moving ahead with solutions.

Step 8: Design "Small Experiments." At this point, the group can identify new approaches to address the underlying problems. The goal is to create small strategies that can be implemented and assessed with one class for a short period, multiple classes for a few days, or with a subset of students. It is crucial that the group create a clear system to gather data so they can learn from both successes *and* failures. For example, when schools started to "experiment" with online learning in spring 2020, many schools did not consider how data could help them determine which strategies were most effective. Consequently, they did not have access to insights gained when they had to start online learning again in the fall of 2020.

Step 9: Establish a Decision-Making Process. Successful strategies from Step 8 should be considered for school-wide implementation, but who will make the final decision about which strategy to use? Leaders must communicate the decision-making process to the entire faculty in advance of any decision impacting the staff. While decisions can be made by principals, the team, or the full faculty, educators are more likely to support decisions they have helped make.

Considerations in Preparing for Change

In this book, the authors present a new way to understand and solve problems – their "framework" includes viewing problems from four perspectives and three dimensions, while having four school-wide conditions in place to support learning and change. However, leaders need to be thoughtful in how they introduce the change process as well as any new initiative.

Walk the Walk
Teachers who have been in education a long time often grow weary of new changes. For this reason, leaders should *not* introduce this new way of viewing and solving problems as a *new initiative*. While leaders may choose to *tell* others about this roadmap, it is much more effective to *show* them. In essence, "walking the walk" is more effective than "talking the talk." For example, instead of sharing the framework and explaining that balancing safety with accountability is one of the four conditions of change, leaders should consistently *demonstrate* this concept by encouraging mistakes as part of learning and growth.

Maintain the Right Balance
Leaders must recognize that the goal of the framework is *not* to add more work. We cannot ask teachers to work more hours, attend more meetings, or solve systemic problems. The goal is to change the culture of the school so problems can be solved more consistently and efficiently. While the nine steps to improvement (above) take time, they do not have to be used to address minor challenges, such as choosing a presenter for professional development or selecting the best tech for remote learning.

This step-by-step process should be reserved for significant schoolwide concerns, such as selecting the goals for ongoing professional development or determining the reopening plan for schools in the fall. The author also reminds leaders that while data are essential (and failure to focus on data leaves us helpless), not everything has to be based on "quantitative analysis." We can gather useful data just by asking stakeholders to share observations. We can also make change more manageable by assigning small groups to study a problem and measure the effectiveness of targeted interventions *before* introducing schoolwide initiatives.

Case Study

At the end of the book, the authors share two school case studies that illustrate the impact of the framework, but for brevity, only one is included here. You can see clearly that the school leader was careful to emphasize open communication and a sense of safety. Applying the framework schools sets leaders up to maximize their influence and create much needed change.

Case Study – Returning to High School after COVID-19

This case study illustrates how the framework can help uncover and address the roots of complex school issues. Principal Jones pulled together a diverse team of teachers, students, parents, and administrators to identify and address the challenges of reopening their school after COVID-19. He wanted the group to focus on the *academic* and *social/emotional needs of students* (versus technical challenges related to safety protocols). The team held many viewpoints: Some stakeholders wanted to "return to normal" as soon as possible, while others saw this as an opportunity to rethink how they do things. Several members worried about the inequities that were exacerbated during the closures (e.g., gaps in student support and academic achievement).

Meeting 1: Preparing the Way
Principal Jones began by explaining that the team's work would be divided into two phases, *identifying the issues* and *brainstorming solutions*. To build trust, the group discussed conversation norms and assumptions (see pp.4-5 of the summary). Next, they shared the initial challenges they saw with reopening, including:

> • reconnecting with students (and families) and learning about their quarantine experiences
> • assessing and addressing student trauma
> • assessing learning gaps and the "Covid slump"
> • acknowledging and discussing the inequities COVID highlighted
> • reconnecting with staff and addressing morale, including fears about returning to school

Then he ended the meeting with a survey aimed to address concerns regarding the effectiveness of the meeting or the process.

Meeting 2: Defining the Problem and Fostering Safety
After reviewing the surveys from the first meeting, the group continued to identify reopening issues. Teachers asked questions such as, *should our expectations around student work be the same?* The union president also shared how upset many teachers were about the criticisms they received, despite their best efforts to adjust to distance learning with little warning and limited training. Parents wanted to know if students would receive more productive feedback when they returned. Jones worked to validate and redirect participants to create a sense of safety. At the end, he thanked them for their willingness to tackle difficult questions.

Meeting 3: Taking Responsibility and Leading by Example
In this meeting, Jones asked participants to reflect on how they might be contributing to the problem. When group members hesitated to share, Jones began by explaining *his own culpability* – he felt he had not done enough to appreciate the struggles teachers had juggling their family and teaching responsibilities from home. His willingness to share lessened the tension as it addressed a "taboo" topic (e.g., concerns about leadership). Some said it felt like a "fresh breeze" in the room. Participants then completed anonymous surveys to share personal insights before the next meeting.

Meeting 4: Belonging and Communication
Principal Jones began by sharing information from the anonymous surveys, several of which touched on teachers' fears. For example, one teacher felt she had failed her students during the closures because her tech skills were weak. Another teacher talked about his feelings of inadequacy when it came to engaging students during online discussions. At this point there was a shift in the group. People felt a sense of belonging because of this open and honest communication. They relaxed and a new idea started to take shape – that a successful return to school required them to address *teachers'* needs. As one participant stated, "If we want to provide a supportive and engaging reopening for students, we must first do that for teachers." The discussion shifted to meeting teachers' emotional and instructional needs:

> • How can we understand where each staff member is when we return to school?
> • How can we learn who they are doing emotionally?
> • What surprised staff about the closing of schools due to Covid-19?
> • What did staff learn about themselves and their students?
> • How could staff have been better supported?

Meeting 5: Narrowing the Focus
The group was inspired by their discoveries in the previous meeting and continued their focus on "teachers first." (Once these needs were addressed, they could move on to other concerns.) The group decided to concentrate on the following questions:

> *What worked?*
> *What should we do the same?*
> *What do we want to do differently?*

These questions would help identify teachers' needs as they prepared for their students to return. They would also help staff pinpoint areas for growth in the event of a future closure (while the lessons from recent closures were still fresh in their minds).

Meeting 6: Sharing Results and Inviting Feedback
The team shared their initial insights with the full staff via a virtual meeting for feedback. They explained that their focus would be on understanding the challenges, needs, and emotions of the staff. Their goal was to provide returning teachers with a sense of safety, belonging, and support that would ultimately lead to better support for students.

Final Notes: While the authors do not provide a summary of the team's subsequent meetings or plans, they emphasize the way this process helped stakeholders uncover the roots of a complex issue. Specifically, if the team hadn't realized how much the closures had impacted their staff, they likely would have jumped into a list of things to do for students. Through open, honest discussions the team was able to realize how integral the staff's well-being was to the success of their students.

THE MAIN IDEA's PL ideas for Managing Change at your School/District

The activities below are for leaders or a leadership team – to help leaders become more "influential" or better able to manage change.

With other leaders, discuss the definition of social influence and why leaders now need to have social influence more than traditional "power" over staff. Social influence is defined as "the influences that people have upon the beliefs, feelings, and behavior of others."

I. As a leadership team, can we really SEE the problem?

A. Explore the value of seeing a problem from other perspectives.
As team, take a problem that exists in your school/district and imagine how different stakeholders might experience it:

	How would each stakeholder group below view the problem?
1. District staff	
2. School leaders	
3. Teachers and staff	
4. Students and families	

B. Conduct a "listening in stereo" activity to better understand the point of view of another stakeholder group.
You can practice hearing directly from a different stakeholder group with this activity. Divide the leadership team into stakeholder groups (e.g., school leaders (principal, APs) and teacher leaders (department chairs, team leaders)). Have each group discuss their own thinking about the problem above.

Then, ask one representative from each group to share what that stakeholder group's experience of the problem is. While this representative is speaking, ask the other group to "listen in stereo" to what they are saying AND how they are feeling. Then ask the second group to share back the content and feelings they are hearing. If the first group says this is inaccurate, have them try again. Then reverse roles of the two groups. Have everyone debrief this "listen in stereo" activity.

II. How do we strengthen the CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE at our school?

1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

A. Discuss the importance of balancing safety with accountability.
Share this table with the leadership team and have them discuss the importance of creating brave spaces rather than safe spaces:

Safe Spaces	Brave Spaces
Privilege politeness	Privilege honesty and authenticity
Value comfort when discussing challenging issues	Accept discomfort as a natural part of difficult conversations
Tend to defend and deflect	Value risk taking, vulnerability, and challenge
Do not actively prepare participants for difficult conversations	Prepare staff to be able to handle difficult conversations

B. Self-assess where your school is with psychological safety in meetings and staff interactions.
Have each member of the leadership team rate each item below from 10/agree to 1/disagree and then brainstorm ideas to improve the items that get the lowest rankings:

1. All staff members share their voices during staff discussions.   2. Participant engagement is balanced across staff members.
3. Disagreements frequently take place during staff meetings.   4. Staff frequently voice concerns about new initiatives.
5. Mistakes and failures are frequently discussed at meetings.   6. Staff frequently contribute to staff meeting agendas.
7. Feelings and emotions are part of staff meeting discussions.

1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

A. Have leaders reflect on their own efforts to increase staff belonging.
As a group or individually, have leaders reflect on how they support their staff's sense of belonging:

- Do I provide growth opportunities for staff that meet their needs?
- Do I plan meetings that invite engagement, respect staff time, seek staff perspective, and listen to ideas and feedback?
- How do I support staff in following through on recommendations for their growth and improvement?
- What am I doing to ensure staff feel appreciated and connected to the school so they will want to remain here?
- What am I doing to recognize, support, and encourage staff collegiality?

B. Create a culture of belonging, not a culture of conformity.
To help leaders (or you can do this with the entire staff) understand the importance of moving beyond a "culture of nice" have them read this classic article: [When Nice Won't Suffice](#) and then brainstorm some *adaptive norms* to guide meeting interactions such as:
- We will listen for the quiet voice and reach out to them.
- We will lean in to discomfort.
- We will engage in conflict and stay engaged to resolve issues.
- We will identify what troubles us and share it with the person.

1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

A. Have leaders reflect on their current meeting style as a way to examine communication.
Remind leaders that every school meeting presents an opportunity to shape communication practices. Then, have them reflect on their current meeting style by answering the following questions and then brainstorming ways to improve school meetings:
- *How are meetings typically structured?*
- *Do participants contribute as much as they'd like (if not, what holds them back)?*
- *Who develops the agenda?*
- *Do participants leave meetings feeling valued and heard?*

Optional: Use a survey to ask staff these same questions, then have leaders compare their own answers with the results of the survey.

B. Examine assumptions that either foster or hinder open communication
Share the examples of assumptions that help or hinder communication with your leadership team (below). Ask if anyone has unintentionally held assumptions that hinder communication (better, model it yourself by sharing). Then brainstorm ways the team can foster the assumptions on the left among the entire staff.

Assumptions that foster open communication	Assumptions that hinder open communication
• We all have information to share.	• I am right; those who disagree with me are wrong.
• People can disagree with us and still have pure motives.	• Those who disagree with me have questionable motives.
• Each of us sees things that others do not.	• I understand the situation and those who disagree do not.
• Differences are opportunities for learning (not *disruptions*).	• I am not contributing to the problem.
• We may be contributing to the problem.	

1. Safety	2. Belonging	3. Communication	4. Experimentation

A. Have leaders reflect on their own growth mindset.
When the leaders of a school/district have a growth mindset this directly impacts the likelihood that they will encourage experimentation. Have the leaders think about a **mistake they made** recently. Then have them individually reflect/write on the questions below. Afterwards, ask a few people to share their thoughts:

> *What happened? What were the consequences? Did you feel you had the opportunity to correct the mistake?*
> *How does this situation and your reaction illustrate either a fixed or growth mindset?*
> *How do you support teachers' growth mindsets when they make mistakes at work?*

B. Have leaders reflect on how they support a growth mindset in teachers and staff.
To focus on how you (i.e., leaders) support teachers' growth mindset, think about a mistake a **teacher or staff member** has made. For example, perhaps they chose the wrong approach when dealing with an upset parent or they tried a new strategy that flopped during a recent observation. Then, write down anything you or the teacher said about the mistake. Try to be as honest as possible and list what you remember saying or think you might say in a similar situation. Then, brainstorm how you could *reframe* (or help the teacher reframe) these comments to better support a growth mindset.

III. How do we plan for an actual change – say, reopening schools in the fall?

A. Examine your school's process for initiating change.
Review **The Nine Steps to Improvement** (summary, p.7). Compare this process to the process your school uses to select and implement new initiatives: Make a note of similarities and differences. Then, describe what (if any) changes you would like to make to your current process to make changes more successful.

B. Gather and examine data from the pandemic to inform decisions about the next school year.
Throughout the text, the authors emphasize the importance of data to inform decision-making. Now is your chance to review the data collected during the pandemic to learn from it and apply it to reopening plans or future closures. Consider these questions:
- How well did our distance learning (or hybrid) plans work? Did we collect data from all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents? If so, what data? What data are we missing?
- Do we know which teachers were most successful during distance learning – and do we know which methods or strategies were most relevant in their instruction? If not, how can we ascertain this information to support all teachers' success?
- In essence, have we collected data (e.g., survey responses) to answer the following questions regarding "pandemic teaching":
  > *What worked? What should we do the same now (or in a future closure)? What do we want to do differently now (or in the future)? What changes from this past year might we want to keep even if we return entirely in person?*

C. Apply the authors' framework to reopening schools in the fall.
The leadership team should be sure to include the three other stakeholder groups as they plan for the 2021-22 school year.
Together, discuss the following questions from the framework:

	What do these 4 groups see as the biggest challenges in reopening schools in the fall?
Superintendent & District Staff	
School Leaders	
Teachers & Staff	
Students & Families	
	What types of surface-level, below-the-surface, and system problems do we expect in the fall?
Surface-level dimension	
Below-the-surface dimension	
System dimension	
	This spring and summer, how might we strengthen the 4 conditions necessary for change?
Safety	
Belonging	
Communication	
Experimentation	