

It Doesn't Have to Be This Hard

“So I was sitting in my cubicle today, and I realized, ever since I started working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every single day that you see me, that’s on the worst day of my life.”

—PETER GIBBONS, *Office Space*¹

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—MARGARET MEAD

IN GREEK MYTH, Sisyphus was a villainous king who murdered travelers and guests. The gods were not amused. As punishment, they condemned him to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a mountain. The nasty twist: every time he got halfway up, the boulder would slide down . . . and he’d begin again.

For those struggling to improve schools, Sisyphus’s tale holds an uncanny resonance. It’s long struck me that Sisyphus—with his promising starts and recurring disappointments—could be the poster child for a half-century of school reform.

I’ve often thought that if educational experts and reformers were gathered at the base of the mountain, watching Sisyphus climb, we wouldn’t

lack advice. We'd yell, "Widen your grip a little!" "Try a different pair of hiking boots!" "Stop for a rest every twenty feet!" Well, we wouldn't use exactly those words. Instead, we'd advise him to use "differentiated instruction," "formative assessment," "data-based decision making," "extended learning time," or any number of ideas every bit as good and sensible as better boots and a firmer grip.

However useful, all this advice would suffer a common flaw. If the past is prologue, I've a strong suspicion that we wouldn't bother to mention our hero's primary dilemma—that he's trying to roll a boulder *up a mountain!*

In schooling, we've had exquisite success finding ways to talk around the mountain. We offer technical advice. We call for consensus. We devise jargon-laden strategies. What we rarely do is observe that we're asking educators to roll a boulder up a mountain or ask what might be done about it.

What "mountain" do I have in mind?

Ann Bonitatibus, associate superintendent of Maryland's Frederick County Public Schools, relates that "in March or April, our individual schools have anywhere from a quarter to a third of their budget remaining. They consequently go on a spending spree, buying paper, Post-it Notes, copier machines, and other items not critical to instruction. They have a fear—'If I give the money back, I'll never get money in the future.' And I try to tell them, 'No, if you give your money back, that's end-of-year money we could use for systemic needs.' But they continue to make wish-list purchases for the adults, which have no connection to student needs." *That's the mountain*—having to plead with school leaders to spend scarce dollars responsibly.

While serving as chancellor in Washington, DC, Michelle Rhee was a polarizing presence. One of her less controversial moves, however, involved making it easier for parents to know if their children were actually showing up for school. When Rhee became chancellor, the paper chain and balky routines meant that it took more than a week for a parent to know whether his or her child had attended school on a given day. Seeking to speed things up, Rhee's staff figured teachers could start taking attendance on laptops. This would permit the data to be processed and posted the same day. The problem: the Washington Teachers Union (WTU)

acknowledged that taking attendance was a permissible work duty, but protested that the collective bargaining agreement prohibited the district from requiring teachers to do “data entry.” Ultimately it took months of negotiations to launch a pilot effort in a handful of schools. *That’s the mountain*—spending time and energy winning permission to make minor tweaks to established routines.

Former Detroit Public Schools emergency financial manager Robert Bobb thought it important to shift resources into boosting early elementary literacy. Yet when he tried to use Title I dollars for early literacy assessment and instruction, the Michigan Department of Education told him: “No way.” The problem? The state said that Bobb’s plan violated federal Title I guidelines around “supplement, not supplant.” When the district reached out to the US Department of Education, they said that the plan seemed fine. But it’s the state agency that makes these decisions. *That’s the mountain*—long-established routines that smother creative problem solving.

In Clark County, Nevada, a principal sought to contract out custodial duties and steer more dollars to instruction. The district, however, tracked staff performance by calculating number of custodians employed per square foot. The result: there was no way to opt for any alternative arrangement—or even to gauge whether a school was clean or custodial dollars were being spent efficiently. Frustrated, the principal gave up. Clark County academic manager Jeremy Hauser wryly observes, “That kind of thing has been fairly common in my experience.” *That’s the mountain*—rigid practices and input-driven metrics that make it tough to spend dollars more wisely.

The mountain is federal program requirements that make it hard to reassign staff or redesign schools, and state regulations that supersize federal rules around Title I or IDEA. It’s rigid schedules that prevent teacher leaders from holding team meetings. It’s contract provisions that dictate school start times. It’s professional development arrangements that tie the hands of principals who want to provide training or support to the teachers who need it, when they need it. It’s paperwork that forces staff to spend hundreds of hours a year filling out forms and mandates that require districts to file the same data multiple times in order to qualify for education funds,

Workforce Investment Act funds, or Medicaid reimbursements. In short, it's the accumulated rules and regulations, policies and practices, contracts and cultures that exhaust educators and leaders.

Yet, when it comes to school reform, we have a remarkable ability to look past the mountain. Instead, we wax enthusiastic about new interventions—block scheduling or site-based management, peer mentoring or extended learning time—which work in a few locations but don't "scale." Disappointed, we scratch our heads, agonize about what we did wrong, and then chalk it up to "flawed implementation."

The mountain means that leaders are constantly sweating their way uphill. Sometimes they succeed, for a day or a season, but when they tire, the boulder rolls back. The mountain requires educational leaders to spend most their time asking permission or battling to change old routines—leaving them to tackle the important work, the transformative work, with only the dregs of their attention and energy.

Sisyphus's grip may well be too narrow and his footwear poorly chosen. But forget the grip and the footwear. It's the mountain. Is there any way to deal with—flatten, bypass, dynamite, chip away at—*that*? That's the question that ought to be front and center in every discussion of educational leadership.

STOP ROLLING THE BOULDER

This is a book for superintendents, principals, school board members, teacher leaders, and district and state staff who have been rolling that boulder too long, and are drained, frustrated, and puzzled at why their good work and furious effort is yielding such limited results.

Is it possible to keep that boulder moving uphill? Sure, but only for a while. Think of Deborah Meier's renowned Central Park East Secondary School, hailed as a terrific example of a student-centered model. All was good, until Meier left. Absent her star power and inspiring leadership, the school soon came apart, to the point where Meier observed, "I stopped visiting. It was too painful."² Education veterans can tell similar tales of big personalities using charm, charisma, and connections to great effect.

The problem: things tend to roll back down the mountain pretty quickly once that hero moves on.

Maybe Sisyphus couldn't escape his fate. But I'd like to think we can do better. This is a book for people ready to do just that.

Now, you may be wondering: Where are the paeans to children, best practices, and the grandeur of teaching? After all, most tomes on education leadership emphasize heart, culture, and instruction, and here I am talking about bureaucracy and mountains. Sounds like a distraction for someone passionate about teaching, learning, and kids, no?

CAGED LEADERSHIP

Maybe. But let me put it to you another way.

Let's change metaphors. When I talk about transformational leadership, I start with Sisyphus and the mountain because it's a familiar tale and an easy image. The problem: it's hard to imagine what you're supposed to do about that implacable peak.

So let's try another visual. Rather than think about school and district leaders pushing that boulder up a mountain, think of them living in a cage. That cage restricts what they can do and how they can do it. But what if that cage isn't as solid or confining as it seems? What if some of the bars are illusory or frail enough to topple with a hard shove? What if the cage is as much a product of habit and belief as concrete and steel? If that's the case—and I'd argue that it is—leaders can do more than they think. They need to make sure that they're not hunched in cages of their own design.

Leadership always entails two complementary roles. One is coaching, mentoring, nurturing, and inspiring others to forge dynamic, professional cultures. This half absorbs almost the whole attention of those who tackle educational leadership. Lost in K-12 is the second half of the leadership equation—the *cage-busting* half that makes it easier for successful and professional cultures to thrive. You don't do cage-busting *instead* of mentoring, coaching, and inspiring, but so that you can do these things *better*. Cage-busting helps make it possible for you to be the leader you aspire to be.

Cage-dwellers spend most of their energy stamping out fires or getting permission to lead, and most of their time wooing recalcitrant staff, remediating ineffective team members, or begging for resources. Cage-busters wake up every morning focused on identifying big challenges, dreaming up solutions, and blasting their way forward. I don't know about you, but that sounds like a *helluva* lot more fun to me.

Now, one way to free leaders is by removing the bars that cage them in. District contracts and procurement processes, rules and regulations, state statutes and board policies hinder leaders in all kinds of ways, making it harder to repair a fence, hire talented staff, or schedule grade-level team meetings. I've spent a lot of time addressing these barriers in books like *Common Sense School Reform* and *Education Unbound*.³

However, that's not what *this* book is about. While educational leaders are indeed hindered in real ways—and time after time, in place after place, I've had superintendents, school leaders, district administrators, and school board members tell me that they'd like to do something but aren't allowed—it's become clear to me that much of what leaders say they can't do, think they can't do, or just don't do is stuff that they are already able to do. Let me say that again: contracts, rules, regulations, statutes, and policies present real problems, but *smart leaders can frequently find ways to bust them*—with enough persistence, knowledge, or ingenuity.

The problem is they don't know they can. Or don't know how to get started. Or are too nervous to try. Or have never been taught they are supposed to push. This book is for readers tired of dwelling in that cage.

CAGE-BUSTING IS NOT ABOUT PICKING FIGHTS

Because we don't usually talk about educational leadership like this, it's easy for the point to be misconstrued. So, let's get a couple of things straight. Cage-busting is not about picking fights, attacking unions, or firing people, and it does not give cage-busters license to wantonly alienate educators or community members. It is nothing more (or less) than thinking ambitiously about how to create great schools and then doing what it takes to make them real. It empowers leaders, frees them from the iron

grip of bureaucracy and routine, and helps them become savvy leaders of a public enterprise.

I'll go further. Not only is cage-busting not an assault on unions or educators, but it holds that leaders need to stop blaming unions, contracts, tight budgets, and the rest for their own failure to lead. Yes, some employees or families will inevitably take issue with some measures that a cage-buster thinks necessary. And any cage-buster worth her salt will stand fast rather than back off from doing what she thinks is best for her students. But conflict is not the goal.

Mike Feinberg, cofounder of the KIPP Academies, eloquently captures the cage-buster's approach to doing what he thinks is right, responsibly and without acrimony:

At KIPP, we honor teachers. But if teachers are not good, if they're not performing, they need to leave . . . We can't compromise on doing right by the students. Now, before they remove that teacher, our leaders need to look in the mirror. Is there any part of this teacher's failure that's really on you, as the leader? Have you done what was necessary to communicate expectations, give them a mentor, observe them, and support improvement? Can you look in the mirror and say, "I've set this teacher up for success, and they're not succeeding?"²⁴

Like Feinberg, cage-busters ask whether they've done everything they can to put educators in a position to succeed. They don't just coach teachers in how to differentiate instruction, they rethink the design of the school and instructional day to make differentiation more manageable. They don't just tell teachers to tutor students who need extra help, they find ways to tap mentors, peers, community assets, or online resources to provide added support. They ask teachers what wastes their time; what disrupts instruction; and how limited time, tools, and resources might be better used. In tackling such questions, leaders help make it clear that they are not blaming teachers but empowering them.

THINKING LIKE A CAGE-BUSTER

Steve Jobs biographer Walter Isaacson has written of Jobs's "reality distortion field"—how the founder of Apple and entrepreneurial icon would

embellish, cajole, manipulate, and rage in order to advance his vision. One colleague explained, "In [Jobs's] presence, reality is malleable . . . It was dangerous to get caught in Steve's distortion field, but it was what led him to actually be able to change reality."⁵ Having spent hundreds of pages documenting Jobs's often-boorish nature, Isaacson takes pains to note that "dozens of the colleagues whom Jobs most abused ended their litany of horror stories by saying that he got them to do things they never dreamed possible."⁶

That's the cage-busting mind-set. It's not about dreaming, seeming innovative, or picking fights—it's about "distorting reality" to change what's possible. And that can involve some bruises.

Distorting reality may be as simple as principal Adrian Manuel's response to teachers who were consistently late at Accion Academy in the Bronx. Tired of pleading futilely for cooperation, Manuel started docking their personal time—a tactic entirely consistent with the city's collective bargaining contract. He told probationary teachers he could let them go if they didn't get it together; he fired six. Other teachers got the message. With that problem resolved, Manuel could turn to more important matters. "It goes back to principals understanding policy," he says. "The union contract is two hundred pages long. I've read it, and few principals do. I've gone through six or seven appeals and I've never lost because I know the letter of the contract." Under Manuel's leadership, Accion Academy rose in three years from the bottom 5 percent of New York City middle schools to the upper one-fifth.⁷

In taking charge of the turnaround effort at Houston's Alief Taylor High School, principal Walter Jackson faced a common challenge: many students were reading way behind grade level. Meanwhile, his high school teachers had little expertise in teaching reading. This is a familiar challenge. Jackson opted for an unfamiliar solution. "I asked myself, 'Why couldn't an elementary teacher, who approaches instruction using a phonetic standpoint instead of whole language, teach high school kids how to read?' So I experimented and filled every reading vacancy I had with someone who had experience teaching elementary reading." Jackson's move helped drive big reading gains, to the point where 90 percent of his students were proficient on Texas's reading assessment.

As executive director of Colorado GEAR UP, a state program to help prepare low-income students for college, Scott Mendelsberg serves a large number of Spanish-speaking Latino students: “Now, in every walk of life, being bilingual is a benefit—except in K–12 education . . . Unfortunately,” he recalls, “The only way I knew to reward these students was through an AP Spanish course,” a semester-long course that these students don’t need and many schools don’t offer. Then he had an idea:

One day on a plane I’m reading about the College Level Examination Program exam, a College Board test that is basically a placement exam. I called the College Board and told them I wanted to offer that exam to all the kids I work with in GEAR UP. And the executive vice president said, “Scott, that’s not what the test is designed to do. We have AP Spanish for those kids.” I said, “The kids I work with aren’t taking AP classes. Most of the time, the schools that they’re in aren’t offering those courses.” I asked what they had to lose, since we were going to pay for the test. Last year, we offered that exam to 585 kids in Colorado. Eighty-eight percent of them got college credit on that seventy-five-minute exam. I had ninth-graders and tenth-graders who essentially had a minor in college Spanish from that one test.

Cage-busters devise new solutions to escape familiar frustrations. (See “Finding a Way to Get It Done.”) They wonder how they might use subsidized AmeriCorps volunteers or work-study students from local colleges to provide cheap, additional support staff. They ask, à la Boston-based Citizen Schools, how they might use educated professionals in the community to provide extended learning time. They explore how “hybrid” school models might allow technology to augment, complement, or extend classroom instruction.

HOW EXPERTS HAVE ENCOURAGED CAGED LEADERSHIP

Many factors contribute to caged leadership. But one of the most influential and most readily addressed is the shared conviction among experts that the cage isn’t a problem. Educational leadership authorities suggest that talk of structures and the cage reflects a “corporate” mind-set and is inappropriate for K–12 schooling. Experts in educational leadership tend

Finding a Way to Get It Done

Cage-busting is about doing everything possible to promote your vision of great teaching and learning—no matter what. New York City's deputy chancellor of education David Weiner recalls when, as a newbie principal at San Francisco's Alvarado Elementary School, he found his inner cage-buster when forced to protect a classroom of vulnerable kids.

"There was a third-grade teacher who was just absolutely unsatisfactory. I'm not joking: she bolted the classroom door to prevent any students who she said 'did not respect her' from entering into the classroom," Weiner says. "The only children [who] were inside the classroom were not African American. The students outside the classroom were all African American males. And these were third-graders!"

Weiner told the teacher that the practice was unacceptable, to no avail. "I called Human Resources to see if we could try to move her out immediately. They said it wasn't possible because she had not received any unsatisfactory ratings." Weiner was left "trying to figure out what the hell to do."

Weiner's solution? "I got myself a laptop and told the secretary I was moving my office to this teacher's classroom. I decided I was going to prevent her from doing this, and that I'd write her up when warranted."

Weiner worked from the teacher's classroom for six weeks. "I'd walk in and put my things down. I ate lunch in there with the students. I set up a desk outside the door so I could have meetings with other teachers and staff. Being in an ineffective teacher's classroom nonstop yields a lot of information. I gave her four or five unsats [unsatisfactory ratings] in the course of three weeks. In two months, she chose to resign. And I moved back to my office."

Weiner tells this story to remind leaders that there are things they have to be willing to stand for: "Maybe I was young and naive, but I'm glad I did it. I mean, there are tough rules that govern state law and union contracts to prevent districts and leaders from doing these types of things. But there are ways to say, 'All right, well these are the rules, and I'm going to play within the rules but I'm going to stretch the limit to where I'm as close to that line as possible.'"

to echo Trinity University professor Thomas Sergiovanni's declaration, in *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, that "corporate" models of leadership don't work in education and that "We [must] accept the reality that leadership for the schoolhouse should be different."⁸ Sergiovanni's charge: "We [need to] begin to invent our own practice," has informed a generation of thinking on educational leadership.⁹

Cage-busters don't believe that school leadership is unique. They agree that it certainly has unique elements and challenges. But they think that inspiring adults, connecting with communities, serving children, leading teams, managing public budgets, and all the rest are roles that have a lot in common with leadership at YMCAs, hospitals, universities, and parks . . . as well as software firms, transit agencies, and charities. In fact, as the dean of one elite business school muses, "I don't know where educators got this idea that business schools do one kind of leadership and they do another. We train students planning to be energy traders, financiers, health-care executives, and nonprofit CEOs side by side. Believe me, they all have very different interests and issues. But the core skills of leading an organization, motivating a team, managing resources, and negotiating an environment are similar across a range of fields."

Readers are likely acquainted with the shelf of influential works by prominent education leadership authorities like Michael Fullan, special adviser to the Minister of Education in Ontario; University of Toronto professor Ben Levin; Boston College professor Andy Hargreaves; Harvard University professor Richard Elmore; University of Toronto professor Kenneth Leithwood; University of Southern California professor Terrence Deal; and University of Missouri-Kansas City professor Lee Bolman. Their advice comes in different flavors, but all emphasize the primacy of curriculum, instruction, coaching, and culture.

Such advice is good and useful. Nobody is arguing otherwise. Cage-busters, too, embrace rich content, rigorous standards, a vibrant school culture, smart use of formative assessment, terrific teaching, and engaged learners.

That said, these experts routinely make two mistakes. First, they have erected a notion of *instructional leadership* that reifies consensus, deifies

stakeholder buy-in, and insists on the “specialness” of education—while dismissing or ignoring the half of the leadership equation that deals with statutory, bureaucratic, contractual, or organizational obstacles. The result: swell ideas that work fine under optimal conditions, but that inevitably disappoint when leaders try to roll them up the mountain.

Second, these experts sometimes wow would-be reformers with bold talk. Upon closer inspection, however, they’re not all that interested in the art or the science of exploding (or even acknowledging) the cage. Rather, seemingly brash strategies add up to little more than recipes for boulder rolling.

An easy way to see this is by flipping through the pages of the education magazines that school and system leaders peruse for guidance and advice. It quickly becomes clear that these are suffused with the “five Cs” of the leadership canon—*collaboration*, *consensus*, *capacity*, *coaching*, and *culture*—while cage-busting concerns are largely ignored. In *Educational Leadership*, for instance, between January 2009 and September 2012, *collaboration* was mentioned 142 times, *professional development* 180, and *culture* 214. *Collaboration*, the least frequently mentioned of these, tallied more appearances than the combined mentions of *regulation*, *licensure*, *compliance*, *maintenance of effort*, *supplement not supplant*, *inept*, *mediocre*, *productivity*, *collective bargaining*, *layoff*, *arbitration*, *grievance*, *due process*, *labor agreement*, and *negotiation*. Indeed, during a period of fierce budget cuts and tumultuous debate about teacher evaluation and tenure, the terms *layoff*, *labor agreement*, *arbitration*, *due process*, *negotiation*, *maintenance of effort*, *regulation*, and *ineptitude* appeared a grand total of twenty-eight times in the course of nearly four years.

Over the same time frame, *Phi Delta Kappan* mentioned *collaboration* 151 times, *culture* 245, and *professional development* 256. Again, *collaboration*, the least common of those three, outpaced the combined mentions of the other fifteen terms.

The point is not that the authorities ought to stop paying attention to the five Cs—it’s that they need to start paying attention to the cage.

Even some conventional authorities agree that something is amiss. Harvard’s Richard Elmore has observed, “Relying on leaders to solve the problem of systemic reform in schools is, to put it bluntly, asking people to do something they don’t know how to do and have had no occasion

to learn in the course of their careers.”¹⁰ In their 2011 book *At a Crossroads*, Donald Hackmann and Martha McCarthy make clear that the ed leadership professoriate lacks experts equipped to teach the stuff of cage-busting. They report, for instance, on a national survey that shows zero percent of ed leadership faculty claim a primary scholarly emphasis on collective bargaining or school business management, and that just 1 or 2 percent say that it’s in school/community relations, personnel management, or technology.¹¹

I want to be clear about two things. First, *yes*, I’m suggesting that almost the entire education leadership canon suffers from a giant blind spot. Second, I *am not* in any way, shape, or form dismissing this work. It has valuable things to say, but it only speaks to *one half* of the leadership equation. In ignoring the cage, leaders trap themselves within it.

Ignoring the Cage

As I’ve noted, most ed leadership authorities devote the whole of their attention to culture, coaching, and collaboration, while implicitly (or explicitly) dismissing challenges like contracts and policy. Richard Elmore suggests that, because “the administrative structure of schools exists to buffer the instructional core” and “teaching is isolated work,” improvement is the product “of purely voluntary acts.”¹² He thus concludes that “the skills and knowledge that matter” for leaders are those directly tied to “instruction and student performance.”¹³ In practice, this has too often been taken as advice to focus on instruction and ignore the cage. I’ll say it again: instruction and culture *are* key, but this work can be made easier or harder by the way leaders deal with rules, regulations, contracts, policies, and entrenched routines.

Indeed, the canon can seem to encourage timid, plaintive leadership. In *Educational Administration*, Ohio State University professor Wayne Hoy and former University of Michigan dean Cecil Miskel conclude that school leaders “should focus on helping, not directing, teachers to improve their teaching.”¹⁴ They suggest that leaders use “special favors, services, and support [to] create social obligations and build goodwill among subordinates. The result should be enhanced development of subordinate loyalty and informal authority.”¹⁵

Such advice suggests that leaders rely almost entirely on warm feelings and good vibes to foster great teaching and learning, and that effective leaders can ignore that inconvenient cage. The result is a pleasantly amorphous vision of school improvement, as when Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink opine in *Sustainable Leadership*, “Like an excellent meal, deep, sustaining learning requires wholesome ingredients, a rich and varied menu, caring preparation, and pleasing presentation.”¹⁶ They go on to state, “Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment. It does not raid the best resources of outstanding students and teachers from neighboring institutions. It does not prosper at other schools’ expense. It does no harm to and actively finds ways to share knowledge and resources with neighboring schools and the local community. Sustainable leadership is not self-centered; it is socially just.”¹⁷

Hargreaves and Fink offer a long list of things that principals ought not do (e.g., harm the surrounding environment, raid outstanding teachers, prosper at others’ expense, or be self-centered). What they don’t do is help a principal figure out how to act on their advice.

Even thinkers who acknowledge the cage seem to quickly dismiss its import. In *Resourceful Leadership*, Harvard’s Elizabeth City touches on the cage just long enough to tell leaders they should focus elsewhere. She writes that, in studying leadership, she has found, “People, time, and money mattered, but there were other elements not on my list of quantifiable indicators that kept cropping up. Those elements were vision, hope, trust, ideas, and energy, and they seemed to matter at least as much as people, time, and money.”¹⁸ Such advice is not wrong, per se. But it does encourage leaders to give short shrift to questions of talent, tools, time, and money, and to presume that worrying about rolling the boulder is unnecessary, or even a waste of time.

Deceptively Bold

Some ed leadership thinkers call for forceful, unwavering action leadership in ringing, cage-busterish tones; yet it quickly becomes clear that they are repackaging the familiar five Cs in edgier language.

Take Michael Fullan’s *What’s Worth Fighting for in the Principalship*, in which leadership, he explains, “is about taking relentless action in the

face of an amalgam of intersecting barriers and creating powerful levers for catapulting the system forward.”¹⁹ Fullan writes, “Changing cultures is the principal’s hardest job because there is so much previous structure and culture to overcome.”²⁰ This all sounds rather cage-bustery. But that impression dissipates almost immediately upon a closer reading.

Fullan presents six “core guidelines” for “principals who fight”: deprivatize teaching; model instructional leadership; build capacity first; grow other leaders; divert the distractors; and be a system leader.²¹ Yet those seeking to act on this agenda will find little guidance on how to overcome the barriers he has cited, beyond encouragement to emphasize culture and capacity-building. For example, Fullan acknowledges that “there are individual cases of unacceptable abuse or gross incompetence that must be acted on immediately.”²² However, he then offers not one concrete tip or caution to help deal with that lousy teacher.

In fact, many of the practical barriers that frustrate school and system leaders go unaddressed by Fullan and other ed leadership experts. An Amazon in-text search of *What’s Worth Fighting for in the Principalship* produces not one mention of *union contract*, *union agreement*, *dismissal*, *layoff*, *fire*, or even *Title I*. The same goes for *School Leadership That Works* by instructional guru Robert Marzano. The same is true of Sergiovanni’s *Rethinking Leadership*, aside from one mention of *fire* in the context of “putting out fires.” Kent Peterson and Terrence Deal’s *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook* contains no mention of *union agreement*, *Title I*, *dismissal*, or *layoffs*. They mention *fire* once—again, in the context of “putting out fires.”²³

By ignoring contracts and district policies, these authors—and there are plenty more—seem to suggest that the ability of leaders to observe classes, schedule team meetings, or remove lousy teachers is peripheral to culture building or mentoring. Indeed, one can peruse the ed leadership canon without learning that leaders charged with turning around a failing school or making painful budget cuts may have to wade into treacherous, rule-laden waters.

In *How to Change 5000 Schools*, Ben Levin writes that structural reforms are “necessary to foster and support good teaching and learning

practices and therefore requisite to any real and lasting change.”²⁴ Yet Levin then makes it clear that by “structures” he’s actually referring to culture, collegiality, and consensus building, and to things like “engagement and commitment by adults” and “appropriate allocation of resources.”²⁵ But all of these good things are significantly shaped by crude organizational realities, to which Levin has given short shrift.

Indeed, when it comes to addressing these realities, Levin balks: “One of the big mistakes many organizations make when they embark on reforms is to combine reform with major changes in the structure of the organization . . . That is almost always a mistake, as structural reorganizations take a great deal of time, engender a great deal of uncertainty among staff, and rarely result in significant improvements in the way the organization works.”²⁶

How to Change 5000 Schools equips leaders with little beyond prescriptions for culture building. Strong cultures are critical. But telling a leader to build a cohesive culture solely through will or skill is like telling a youth soccer coach to focus on building a winning team culture—no matter that the assistant coach is a bully, the practice field is closed for safety reasons, or the team only has nine players. Tackling these “structural” problems would give the coach a better chance to build a successful culture. Sure, there are superheroes who might succeed anyway, but it’s probably not the way to bet.

What About Instructional Leadership?

Some readers may think it’s hard to reconcile cage-busting with instructional leadership. They shouldn’t. The two are complements, not substitutes. Cage-busting creates the conditions for culture building, coaching, and instructional leadership.

Just 10 percent of principals say they are satisfied with the amount of time they devote to instructional leadership. Public Agenda polling expert Jean Johnson notes, “Fighting for time for instructional leadership appears to be one of the main frustrations of being a principal today.”²⁷ The Urban Institute reports that principals spend only 13 percent of their time on “day-to-day” instructional tasks and programs and over 50 percent on administration and management.²⁸ Cage-busting can help make

other roles more manageable, giving leaders more time to attend to what matters most.

Yet champions of instructional leadership often denounce efforts to address the cage as a distraction. Thelbert Drake and William Roe argue in *The Principalship* that “running a tight ship” is a “distortion of the goal of educating children.”²⁹ When it’s suggested that schools and systems need to do a better job of tapping talent or spending dollars smarter, experts snap that kids aren’t widgets.

It may seem bizarre to suggest that using time and money wisely is a distraction, yet that notion recurs with startling consistency. Take the unavoidable issue of ineffective teachers. Champions of instructional leadership often imply that responsible leaders should accept the staff they have and then cajole, coach, and collaborate their way to great instruction. Fullan and Hargreaves assert in *What’s Worth Fighting for in Your School?* that principals should “find something to value in all the school’s teachers. Even poor or mediocre teachers have good points that can present opportunities to give praise and raise self-esteem . . . The worst thing to do is to write off apparently poor or mediocre teachers as dead wood, and seek easy administrative solutions in transfers or retirements . . . Try doing the hard thing, the right thing, the ethical thing, and explore ways of bringing these teachers back instead.”³⁰

Coaching and cajoling mediocre teachers is important and essential work—Fullan and Hargreaves get that right. Where they go wrong is to suggest that good leaders should do this ad infinitum. This is a ludicrous use of time and energy, and a disservice to the kids involved. Cage-busters coach and cajole *as long as they think it makes sense for the school, system, and students*—and work to briskly replace teachers when that is no longer the case. (See “Oh, Yeah, *That Stuff*.”)

Cage-busters seek a world in which, rather than begging or enticing mediocre teachers to improve, school leaders have reliable ways to evaluate teachers and to dismiss them when necessary. Cage-busters seek collective bargaining agreements that expedite the process and quickly resolve disputes. They believe this will permit principals to spend more time working with effective educators and forging a collaborative culture on a staff not peppered with malcontents.

Oh, Yeah, *That* Stuff

I recall one visit to Fairfax County, Virginia. The superintendent had taken me to visit a middle school that had been “turned around” and was now piloting some terrific team-teaching models. We met with the principal and about a dozen faculty for a friendly conversation. The principal enthusiastically told us about the culture they’d established. She explained how the teaching teams collaborated and used data. Teachers avidly shared techniques and experiences.

Near the end of the visit, the superintendent and I once again asked the principal to explain how she’d gotten a troubled school onto this dynamic trajectory. She once again credited teamwork, collaboration, and buy-in. This time, I interrupted and asked, “Okay, but how’d you get all the teachers in a dysfunctional school to suddenly change their behavior? *How* did you get everyone to buy in?”

She looked startled. “Well, not all of them did. We had to change a few teachers.”

“Oh,” I said. “How many?”

The principal looked quizzically at one of her veteran teachers, as if trying to remember. She looked at the superintendent, as if making sure it was okay to discuss this. Then she said, “Probably about 40 or 50 percent didn’t return that first year, and another dozen probably left that following year.”

That might’ve merited a mention, don’t you think?

That was an important bit of information. It didn’t lessen the school’s accomplishment. But it suggests that even this acclaimed principal needed personnel changes to set the table for everything else. It’s a problem that this is the last thing the principal would think to mention. And it’s an even bigger problem that the experts on educational leadership are uninterested in such things.

HOW WE GOT HERE

The case for cage-busting can sometimes feel like a blame-the-victim exercise, as if we’re blaming school and system leaders for their burdens. It shouldn’t. Cage-dwelling leadership is the product of professional norms, training, and circumstances that date back nearly a century.

In the early 1900s, influenced by education psychologist Edward Thorndike and scientific management guru Frederick Taylor, proponents of *progressive education* worked to bring the same standardization and routine to education that they admired in industry and business.³¹ The problem, explained Ellwood Cubberley, dean of the School of Education at Stanford University from 1917–1933 and, in many ways, the father of modern school administration, had been that, before 1900, schools had been like “a manufacturing establishment running at a low grade of efficiency.”³²

In short, progressives worked hard to import the best practices of private industry to American education.³³ (This is why the familiar school model bears such an uncanny resemblance to the early-twentieth-century factory.) That model made some sense at the time, helping to manage a massive expansion of schooling in a world lacking modern data tools and communications technology.

Since that era, though, K–12’s routines and rules have been largely preserved, as if in amber. Intrusive regulation, petty bureaucracy, and balky decision making have bizarrely come to be treated as part of the schoolhouse culture.

In the private sector, meanwhile, old giants like Univac, TWA, and Xerox have given way to Google, JetBlue, and Apple. These new ventures had the freedom to build brand new cultures, staffing models, evaluation systems, and delivery models that took full advantage of evolving talent, tools, and technology.

In schooling, this passing of the baton is absent. Instead, leaders inherit long-standing schools or school systems. As successive generations of entrepreneurs and thinkers in other sectors have revisited basic assumptions and built wholly new organizations, educational leadership preparation has clung to aged norms. Indeed, those championing more flexible, creative, and quality- and cost-conscious leadership have been pilloried for pursuing “corporate-style school reform” or labeled “enemies” of public education.³⁴ As I noted in *The Same Thing Over and Over*, “The debate over the sanctity of ‘schoolhouse leadership,’ then, is really a debate between the defenders of early-twentieth-century management practices and those championing the management practices [favored] by leading public and private organizations in recent decades.”³⁵

The stale party line leaves leaders ill-equipped to negotiate a profoundly changed world of schooling—where changes in our expectations, the labor market, and the state of tools and technology create new challenges and vast new opportunities to answer them. Indeed, there's little reason to expect that century-old assumptions about how to organize and deliver schooling are necessarily the smartest way forward. It's time to swap out factory-style, early-twentieth-century management for more dynamic, creative, and agile leadership.

Yet, today, few school or system leaders have much experience outside the confines of K–12 or exposure to other ways of thinking about how to best use talent, tools, time, and money.³⁶ Educational leaders typically start as teachers and receive all of their leadership training in schools of education.³⁷ More than 99 percent of superintendents have been teachers; as the American Association of School Administrators has noted, the traditional career path for superintendents “involves moving through organizational hierarchy of a public school district.”³⁸ Half of all superintendents obtained their first administrative position before age thirty, meaning they've never had even a brief chance to venture outside of K–12.³⁹ It's good that our school systems are led by committed, veteran educators. It means, though, that most leaders have little opportunity to see how budgeting, accountability, personnel evaluation, or compensation are tackled in other, more dynamic sectors.

What Educational Leaders Are Taught

School and system leaders recognize there's a problem with leadership preparation. According to polling by Public Agenda, 72 percent of superintendents and 67 percent of principals report that “typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school districts.”⁴⁰

Principal preparation programs devote little or no attention to concerns like removing mediocre employees or seeking out cost efficiencies. Courses emphasize compliance with regulations while giving short shrift to helping leaders learn to utilize data or technology.⁴¹ Indeed, education law scholar Perry Zirkel has suggested that a lack of knowledge and understanding by administrators leads them to overestimate legal requirements and fosters excessive caution.⁴²

K-12 leaders are rarely exposed to alternative ways of thinking about management and leadership. In 2007, Andrew Kelly and I reported on a national examination of principal preparation courses. We found “little attention to teaching new principals to hire, evaluate, reward, or terminate employees” and noted that courses were more likely to dismiss such questions as distractions from the real work of culture building. One personal favorite: the week on personnel management titled, “The symbolism of attempting to fire an incompetent teacher.” Barely 5 percent of the course weeks devoted to personnel management addressed employee compensation or termination. Readings in preparation courses consisted almost entirely of authors like Sergiovanni, Fullan, Bolman, and Linda Darling-Hammond, who focus on the “unique” challenges of school leadership. Almost absent were iconic leadership and management authorities like Michael Porter, Jim Collins, Clayton Christensen, and Tom Peters.⁴³

Organizations in most other fields embrace intellectual and experiential diversity when training and selecting leaders, by hiring or promoting managers from a variety of sectors, roles, and organizations. In MBA programs, students hoping to work in nonprofits and for-profits, in fields from energy to publishing, learn side by side. Not so in education leadership programs, where preparation consists almost uniformly of career educators studying alongside one another.

This state of affairs has drawn concern, even from supporters of traditional educational administration training. In their 2011 survey of the educational leadership professoriate, Donald Hackmann and Martha McCarthy observed, “If leadership preparation programs are to engage in substantive reforms, there must be divergent viewpoints and a willingness to examine departmental norms and practices.” Yet they find a lack of “different perspectives within the educational leadership professoriate” and conclude that “educational leadership faculty members seem to remain complacent about issues and problems in the field.”⁴⁴

Professional Incentives and Mind-Set

Given their background and preparation, it's hardly surprising that few leaders are inclined to be cage-busters. While leaders in most sectors take for granted the value of rewarding effective employees and removing ineffective

ones, such views are more controversial in schooling. Public Agenda has reported that only one in five superintendents deem linking consequences to student learning a “very effective” way to improve teacher quality.⁴⁵ Principals were even more skeptical, and most believe that teacher quality can be boosted “very effectively” by increasing professional development or decreasing class size.⁴⁶ That same lack of enthusiasm for strategies that promise discomfort or controversy is echoed by school board members.⁴⁷

Leaders also evince little appetite for proposals to streamline operations or improve efficiency. Though 84 percent of district leaders described their district as “inadequately funded” in 2010, 24 percent said they “never considered” freezing outside professional service contracts; 73 percent never considered reducing employee benefits; 70 percent never considered outsourcing custodial or maintenance work; 48 percent never considered finding new transportation efficiencies; and 75 percent never considered closing or consolidating schools.⁴⁸ Perhaps this is why, as scholars Rick Ginsberg and Karen Multon have observed, school leaders believe “that all cuts, no matter where they’re focused,” hurt classrooms, and that anyone who thinks otherwise “doesn’t really understand the culture of schools.”⁴⁹

The cage-dwelling mind-set even permeates operations and system management. For instance, the Association of School Business Officials reported in 2011 that just 41 percent of its members have a background in business and that only about half hold a degree beyond the BA. While 84 percent of members polled say—sensibly—that managing day-to-day finances and budgeting is one of their top three responsibilities, just one-third say the same about evaluating the effective allocation and use of resources. Understandably, nearly three-fourths report that making cuts to their district budget “keeps them up nights.” More surprising is that just 48 percent say the same about demonstrating that tax dollars are spent optimally. In short, operational staff are attentive to system routines, but show less interest in ensuring that dollars are used wisely or well.⁵⁰ Let’s be clear: the point here is not to criticize school business officials but to suggest how immersive the cage-dwelling culture really is.

In a field where laws, regulations, and contracts color every decision, leaders place surprisingly little stock in understanding legal constraints. In fact, just 3 percent of big-district (twenty-five thousand or more stu-

dents) superintendents deem legal questions a relevant subject for professional development.⁵¹ Most leaders prefer to ignore the mountain—even as they exhaust themselves rolling the boulder.

Finally, K–12 is rife with estimations of leadership performance that are alternately euphoric and ill-founded. A 2010 survey found that 84 percent of school boards rated their superintendents as good or excellent, and fewer than 1 percent rated them below average.⁵² At the same time, New Leaders for New Schools reported in 2010 that principal evaluation systems focus on “the wrong things, lack clear performance standards, and lack rigor in both their design and attention to implementation.”⁵³

BOULDER ROLLING AND REPLICATION

The five Cs are so appealing, in part, because they feel intimately linked to things we can see in classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms. The problem with all those terrific models for professional development and differentiated instruction is that they’re basically a set of boulder-rolling techniques. Less immediately evident is that all of these things are subject to the accumulated rules, routines, regulations, contracts, and policies that may go unnoticed but shape everything else. Whether promising models work as intended will depend as much upon the shape of the mountain as on the technical merit of the advice.

Even seemingly successful pilot programs depend on much more than the model. When replication disappoints, we tend to blame “implementation” or the program itself. But success often has less to do with the particular practices than with circumstance. Upon closer inspection, many successful pilot programs benefit because implementation is more akin to chasing a boulder downhill than to rolling it uphill. Why is that? A variety of reasons, including:

Philanthropic support: Dollars are often available to fund new initiatives.

Such funding allows pilot programs to offer services and opportunities that prove unsustainable when the program expands to new sites.

Expertise: Pilot efforts are, by design, supported by the experts who have conceived of the model (or intervention). They benefit from intense,

sustained, loving attention by those who are most invested in the idea. Later sites have less access to that talent.

Enthusiasm: Pilot efforts are launched where the leaders or staff in question are enthusiastic enough to be the pioneers. That passion and sense of ownership are enormously helpful in making early iterations successful.

Accommodations: Pilot efforts are frequently launched in sites where the local leadership has the wherewithal to provide helpful waivers, leeway, or support. For instance, a new academic program benefits from flexibility with regards to staffing rules. When the same models are implemented in less accommodating settings, they frequently fail to deliver.

The truth is we've been able to identify the elements of "effective schools" for four decades, going back to Ron Edmonds's seminal work in the 1970s, but we've struggled, through the whole of that period, to scale up scattered successes. This history illustrates the problem with focusing on instructional and improvement strategies without attending to the statutory, regulatory, contractual, or organizational obstacles. The problem is that we fixate on the climb and turn a blind eye to the terrain. The result is a constant chase for new miracle solutions that never quite pan out.

IS CAGE-BUSTING JUST FOR MARTYRS?

Even when successful, cage-busting principals, superintendents, school board members, teacher leaders, and state chiefs can encounter brutal blowback. Critics have screamed "Controversial!" at a raft of cage-busting leaders, regardless of the merits of the charge. The truth is, leaders can work hard to play nice and woo stakeholders, but those determined to address the cage can still expect aggrieved parties to blast them regardless of the merits.

Leaders deemed "divisive" have become lightning rods, been sued, had their agendas thwarted by diehard opponents, and turned into combatants in larger political debates. For those more interested in leading great schools than in policy debate, this can be a frustrating turn. Moreover, for all the headaches, even successful cage-busters are able to push only so far. They're never able to bust all the bars they might want or need to.

The upshot is that even unflinching readers may say, “Great. You can and should do these things, but will you live to see them come to fruition? And once you’ve been labeled controversial, won’t the school board or community leaders opt for a successor who’ll roll everything back?” Even if you think cage-busting is right and necessary, how can you be confident it’ll yield anything more than martyrdom?

The cage-buster’s response? For starters, as Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), soberly observes, “I don’t think you take a state superintendent’s job today assuming you’re going to retire in it. Most chiefs today understand that, if you are going to take on an aggressive agenda, you have a life span. If you step back and play it safe, you aren’t going to make any change, anyway.”

It’s true that school boards, business leaders, parents, editorial boards, and civic leaders in many communities have long prized tranquility above performance. Leaders who keep the waters calm, avoid harsh cuts, and say the right things tend to earn good reputations and laudatory press.

But things can change. In the past decade, state-level and national advocacy has shifted the center of gravity in K–12, generating more tolerance and enthusiasm for cage-busting than was once the case. Charter schooling, virtual delivery, value-added systems, and new providers offer leaders new tools. Accountability systems, increased transparency, and tight budgets have made it easier to justify tough-minded changes. An increasing number of cage-busters, backed by forceful advocacy and enthusiastic foundations and public officials, means there’s some safety in numbers.

And cage-busters can boost the odds they’ll be more than martyrs. The pages that follow relay strategies that can help leaders take full advantage of existing laws and regulations, reduce friction, frame the public debate, mobilize allies, and fortify their political position. Smart cage-busters operate strategically, move and speak deliberately, and avoid reckless posturing—building credibility and political capital. And we’ll discuss why would-be cage-busters may wish to gravitate toward schools and communities that are ready and willing to support their work, and how to recruit and cultivate local allies to help.

In the end, there are no guarantees. Cage-busting can prove a challenging course. That’s why advocates, public officials, and would-be reformers

are right to attack the constraints that dissuade many from the cage-buster's path. And it's why so many leaders have chosen the safe, familiar course of the five Cs rather than the perilous promise of cage-busting.

THE BOOK AHEAD

There is a way out of the cage. But it requires that we stop talking about just getting more great teachers or "fixing" schools, and start thinking expansively about how to maximize the amount of great learning, teaching, and schooling. After all, the world of schooling has changed powerfully, in ways that can leave today's schools and teachers ill-equipped for new challenges. Our nation is more diverse and technologically advanced than it was a century ago, while the import of education has grown exponentially.

A century ago, barely one American in ten finished high school; today, we believe it's critical that every citizen ought to have a meaningful high school degree. New technologies and data systems have made possible approaches to diagnosis, intervention, and instructional delivery that were once the province of fiction. We need leaders who can leverage these developments, escape old strictures, and bring our schools into the twenty-first century. Yet even would-be reformers tend to assume the factory-model classroom and its rigid bell schedules, credit requirements, age-based grade levels, job classifications, and physical specifications when talking about school improvement.

I believe that most leaders recognize the frustrations of the cage and are eager to lead more boldly, but are uncertain how to do so. That's a matter of training, intentions, and socialization. But also of ideas and seeing what's possible. That's where this book comes in. It's intended to equip leaders—in schools, systems, and states—with the tools that can help them avoid Sisyphus's dismal fate.

Cage-busting is not a program or pedagogy. It's a mind-set. It's not a substitute for coaching, instructional rounds, mentoring, culture building, or instructional leadership—it makes it possible to do these things better. Once you've embraced the cage-busting mind-set—once you're questioning routines, challenging obstacles, and seeking new possibilities

and solutions—transformative leadership becomes more manageable and less exhausting.

Here's how the book will unfold: In chapter 2, we'll discuss some bad habits and how to shake them off. Chapter 3 sketches out how cage-busters tackle problems. Chapter 4 delves into understanding the bars of the cage. Chapter 5 explores how to go after those bars. Chapter 6 discusses how to tap talent, tools, and dollars in smarter ways. Chapter 7 addresses the practical and political side of all this. Finally, chapter 8 offers some lessons and advice for those ready to unleash their inner cage-buster.

What follows can, sometimes seem like a lot. To help keep things straight, I'd refer you to the convenient cheat sheet version of each chapter you'll find in appendix A. Without further ado, let's get to it.