



Leadership: Key Competencies for Whole-System Change

By Lyle Kirtman and Michael Fullan (Solution Tree Press, 2016)

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

The main ideas of the book are:

- ~ Successful district and school leaders move beyond a culture of compliance and create an environment that is exciting, vibrant and focuses on real continuous improvement.
- ~ This book helps school leaders look beyond the myriad distractions and red tape in education so they can focus on the seven leadership competencies that matter most.

Why I chose this book:

When you speak to school leaders, they say they've had enough of compliance. However, they believe that there's nothing they can do about it. I like that this book – while conceding that compliance must be attended to – brings hope that there's a different way to do things. It involves focus and simplicity.

Kirtman has done extensive research and found that high-performing school leaders have seven competencies in common. Using these seven competencies to assess yourself – and perhaps your leadership team as well – is a fantastic way to better understand your strengths and weaknesses as a school leader. This tool provides a much needed opportunity to reflect over the summer, and take important steps to enhance your impact as a leader.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

- ✓ How achieving simplicity and focus is key to becoming a successful leader
- ✓ The seven research-based competencies high-performance leaders possess: challenge the status quo, build trust, create a commonly owned plan, focus on team over self, have a sense of urgency, commit to continual improvement, and build partnerships
- ✓ What these seven competencies look like in action – two vignettes of school leaders
- ✓ How successful leaders use creative insubordination to move compliance to the side of their plates
- ✓ How to create a “come with us” environment so the most talented staff will not only want to join you, but will want to *stay*
- ✓ How you can help improve the entire system, regardless of whether you are a district or school leader
- ✓ PD suggestions from The Main Idea for using the ideas in the book to improve your own and your team's leadership

Chapter 1 – Achieving Simplicity and Focus

While many educational leaders find themselves caught up in following innumerable initiatives and compliance tasks, there is a group of *high-performing* leaders who have found a way around these hurdles. And it turns out that these successful leaders share a set of traits, practices, and competencies that lead to their successes. Furthermore, these educational leaders have much in common with accomplished leaders in the business, health care, and public sector as well.

Simplicity and Focus

There are a few key elements that make these leaders the successes they are. The first is simplicity and focus. It's actually harder to be simple than complex. You have to clarify your thinking in order to make something simple. Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple, believed strongly in this. Education has become far too complex. On top of increasingly intricate educational bureaucracies, we have politicians, corporations, universities, and others muddying the waters by trying to solve today's education problems. We need to help leaders fight off these distractions and see beyond all of the red tape and regulations so they can commit themselves to improving the lives of students. The purpose of this book is to help educational leaders achieve simplicity and focus. The book contains examples of leaders – both inside and outside the field of education – who have been able to successfully simplify and focus their work.

As the authors define it, "Simplicity is the art and science of thinking, planning, and measuring our actions against the results we need to achieve." Part of this involves reflecting and learning along the way. One former superintendent uses the following questions to help schools choose those initiatives that will most likely lead to their desired results:

1. Is this the right initiative?
2. Is this the right time?
3. Is this the right intensity for implementation?

Once leaders decrease all of the noise that impedes their real work, they can focus on what is deeply important: educating students and building a great school. To help leaders simplify their work and focus their thinking, they need to do two important things:

- (1) Use the right drivers for system success
- (2) Develop core competencies for continuous improvement

(1) Using the Right Drivers for System Success

A number of countries are trying to accelerate education reform with the *wrong* drivers: standards, assessments, monitoring, and interventions. There is a misguided sense, particularly in the United States, that education results can be enforced through accountability and compliance. Perhaps this comes from the belief that this is how the *business* world achieves success. However, this is inaccurate. While all successful businesses *do* have accountability and compliance systems in place, these are *not* the keys to their success. Instead, they have found success through simplifying their work and focusing on customer needs while attracting and motivating the best staff. Furthermore, these policies are not the ones that have led to educational successes in other countries.

This book looks at the *right* drivers – that is, those policies and strategies that have a *positive* impact on performance. Below is an overview of four wrong drivers that have had negative impacts on performance along with the corresponding right drivers that lead to more positive changes.

1. **Capacity building, not negative accountability:** Accountability stifles our ability to create cultures of excellence. Instead we must focus on capacity building.
2. **Teamwork, not individualistic strategies:** Focusing on the group means maximizing everyone's talents which leads to sustainable results.
3. **Pedagogy, not technology:** Technology is only wonderful if it changes the way we do instruction.
4. **Systemic policies, not ad hoc policies:** Fragmentation never leads to sustainable results. Systematic thinking and integrated goals focus the work of the education community.

Focusing on the wrong drivers may lead to an initial quick-fix, but in the end, they slow down achievement.

(2) Developing Core Competencies for Continuous Improvement

In order for schools and school systems to be successful, it is vital to hire a leader who can create the *conditions* for excellence, that is, drive the cultural change needed for success. To change the system, leaders must have the ability to change the *culture*. Culture, more than any initiative, is what determines whether a new program will work or not. There are seven core competencies leaders must develop to create the type of culture that leads to sustainable results. These seven competencies – developed by Lyle Kirtman from his research on over 600 leaders and 200 principals – will be described in the upcoming chapters.

Chapter 2 – Understanding the Seven Leadership Competencies

In an organization, sustainable improvement requires the leader to set a clear direction while also keeping distractions at bay. Daniel Goleman adds to the understanding of what it means for a leader to have focus: it involves paying attention to the self, to others, and also to the wider world. Based on his research of leaders for over thirty years, Kirtman has found that a leader who successfully maintains focus on his or her own improvement, builds capacity in others, *and* is aware of larger trends in education possesses the following seven competencies (below this list is a more detailed list of the traits for each competency):

1. Challenges the status quo
2. Builds trust through clear communication and expectations
3. Creates a commonly owned plan for success
4. Focuses on team over self
5. Has a high sense of urgency for improving student achievement
6. Has a commitment to continuous improvement for self and organization
7. Builds external networks and partnerships

Kirtman's Seven Competencies for School Leadership	
1.	Challenges the Status Quo a. Delegates compliance tasks and does not let rules and regulations impede results b. Challenges traditional practices that block improvements c. Is willing to take risks d. Looks for innovations that get results
2.	Builds Trust Through Clear Communication and Expectations a. Is direct about performance expectations b. Follows through on all commitments c. Clarifies understandings in written and verbal communication d. Deals with conflict
3.	Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success a. Creates written plans and ensures buy in b. Monitors implementation of the plan, adjusts plans based on new data, and communicates changes c. Ensures goals are measured d. Creates short- and long-term plans
4.	Focuses on Team Over Self a. Hires the best people for the team b. Commits to the development of a high-performing leadership team c. Builds a team environment d. Seeks critical feedback e. Empowers staff to make decisions and get results f. Supports the professional development of all staff
5.	Has High Sense of Urgency for Change and Sustainable Results in Student Achievement a. Is able to decisively move initiatives ahead quickly b. Uses instructional data to support needed change c. Builds systemic strategies to ensure sustainability of change d. Sets a clear direction for the organization e. Is able to deal with and manage change effectively
6.	Commits to Continuous Improvement for Self and Organization a. Has a high sense of curiosity for new ways to get results b. Changes current practices for self and others willingly c. Listens to all team members to change practices to obtain results d. Takes responsibility for own actions – no excuses e. Uses strong self-management and self-reflection skills
7.	Builds External Networks and Partnerships a. Sees his/her role as a leader outside of the work environment and community walls b. Understands his/her role as a being part of a variety of external networks for change c. Has a strong ability to engage people inside and outside the school in two-way partnerships d. Uses technology to expand and manage a network of resource people

Competency 1: Challenges the Status Quo

In his research on leaders, Lyle Kirtman found that while *most* leaders are very compliant to mandates, high-performing leaders are *not* rule followers. It's not that the leaders in his study broke any laws, and in fact, they did delegate most compliance tasks. However, they were focused on achieving results *first* and simply put less effort into tackling compliance tasks. They were comfortable getting a grade of C in compliance if it meant getting an A in learning. Part of achieving these results involves taking risks and not waiting to ask permission from supervisors to do so (although they communicate about their plans along the way). Another aspect of competency one is being able to challenge those traditional practices that might get in the way of improvement, but doing so in a way that respects the traditions of the community. Finally, leaders must be innovative in their attempts to get results – constantly finding new ways to engage students, gain community support, and involve staff. Many schools claim to prepare students for the 21st century but then play it safe avoiding any type of risk or innovation to actually achieve this.

Competency 2: Builds Trust Through Clear Communication and Expectations

To develop trust, leaders must convey their expectations, model them, and monitor them. Trust and action seem to be intrinsically connected. Trust flourishes when a leader is clear in what she is saying and consistent in her actions. This means being clear about performance expectations *before* any actions are required. Then to maintain trust, it is vital to follow through on all commitments with both actions and clear and consistent written and spoken communications. While email can enhance communication, it is often misinterpreted and may create mistrust. It is one-on-one communication that is vital for developing trust. Finally, if leaders avoid addressing conflict, this is a sure way to erode trust. In contrast, when leaders handle conflict well, this increases trust.

Competency 3: Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success

Those leaders who can look at complex data, consolidate it, and create a systematic approach for moving forward are successful in education. Many leaders end up with what Michael Fullan calls “fat plans” – great-looking, comprehensive plans that end up on the shelf. Instead, successful leaders create “skinny plans” -- one- or two-page plans -- that are inspiring and action oriented. It is not only easier to get buy-in for these short, focused plans, but it is easier to monitor them, measure them, and update them as conditions change. Rather than putting a great deal of time into creating the plan, instead shorten the planning process and increase the time spent on learning from the implementation of it.

Competency 4: Focuses on Team Over Self

This competency is deeply connected to two of the four drivers for system success: capacity building and teamwork. A leader will only be successful if he has built leadership capacity in his school or district. To do this, leaders must build a high-performing leadership team. This involves more than hiring the best people. A key aspect of team development is the leader’s ability to model being a voracious learner and self-reflecting on his strengths and areas to improve. The leader must pay attention to the development of the team and acknowledge that when a new person joins, the dynamic changes, and therefore the development of the team must continue. In addition, the leader needs to help the team focus on outcomes rather than dictating *how* the work is done. Empowering teams will yield greater results than top-down mandates. Empowerment means more than delegating tasks; it means genuinely distributing leadership. When a team is truly effective, it can function whether or not the principal is in the building.

Competency 5: Has a High Sense of Urgency for Improving Student Achievement

Leaders who successfully establish a results-oriented environment know how to create a sense of urgency. This is not a reactive type of urgency, but rather a strategic and purposeful one. To do so, the leader must decisively move initiatives forward without a lot of time spent on trying to please everyone and achieving complete consensus. A strong leader moves ahead quickly but is also flexible enough to adjust plans based on new data. While data can be very useful in making the case for the new initiative and creating a sense of urgency, it should not be used to blame teachers and put them on the defensive. Instead, leaders need to work toward more sustainable change by creating an environment in which data is regularly used to determine needed change. Another part of creating long-lasting change is ensuring that changes are systemic. Improvements in one classroom may not be present in all, so the leader must build systemic strategies that help everyone improve. Some leaders successfully create a sense of urgency but then do not know how to manage the change process. They must remember to meet people where they are as everyone manages change differently.

Competency 6: Has a Commitment to Continuous Improvement for Self and Organization

Great leaders are voracious about continuing their learning and constantly search for new ways to get results. They believe they are on a continual journey to learn from others, and do what they can to improve themselves. This involves a range of skills from listening to others to taking responsibility for and learning from their own mistakes. It also requires a great deal of self-management – the ability to set priorities, track projects, and meet deadlines.

Competency 7: Builds External Networks and Partnerships

Although leaders often see themselves as having no time, it is important to reach beyond the school walls, to form partnerships, access new ideas, and work on solving problems with others. The best leaders find the time to do this. They not only know how to reach out to other principals in the state, country, and world to *get* support, but they know that partnerships are a two-way street and they *give* support as well. Beyond the education world, these leaders also reach out to community groups, colleges, private-sector businesses, and other professionals. Once leaders begin to reach out they are surprised at the unlimited resources and opportunities that abound.

Chapter 3 – Seeing the Competencies in Action

This chapter shows how the seven competencies play out by describing four examples of school leaders in action. Each vignette includes the results of how that school leader performed in a self-assessment of the competencies as well as what that looks like on the ground. This summary includes an overview of two of those vignettes.

The First Vignette: The Need to Build Long-Term Change

One Superintendent's Results on a Self-Assessment of the Seven Competencies							
100%							
90%							
80%							
70%							
60%							
50%							
40%							
30%							
20%							
10%							
	1. Status Quo	2. Trust	3. Common Plan	4. Team Over Self	5. Sense of Urgency	6. Continuous Improvement	7. Networks

One high-energy superintendent who tended to take over low-performing districts had no trouble coming in, challenging the status quo, and creating short-term change. However, he struggled with building sustainable change. The chart above shows the results of his self-assessment of the seven competencies. The problem, as shown in the chart, is that he was only strong in three of the seven areas. He was able to create a sense of urgency when taking over a new district, develop short-term partnerships, and he touched on all of the competencies, but didn't delve deep enough to establish long-term change. He would introduce a new initiative but then provided little follow-up, and did not show how the initiative was connected to the focus he had introduced. Further, he eroded trust. Because he saw staff questions as attacks, became defensive, lacked self-awareness, and was not able to receive feedback, he destroyed the team's trust and left people skeptical about the work of the team. This vignette points to the fact that being very strong in a few of the seven competencies is not enough for strong, long-lasting leadership.

The Second Vignette: The Need to Move from Process to Results

One Superintendent's Results on a Self-Assessment of the Seven Competencies							
100%							
90%							
80%							
70%							
60%							
50%							
40%							
30%							
20%							
10%							
	1. Status Quo	2. Trust	3. Common Plan	4. Team Over Self	5. Sense of Urgency	6. Continuous Improvement	7. Networks

In the next example, a superintendent was hired to help a large urban district improve its student achievement on test scores. This district's demographics were rapidly changing and there was a need for a sense of urgency to change. However, the culture was deeply consensus based and had a history of focusing on *process over results*. While this led to feelings of empowerment, it did not help to improve results. The superintendent started by respecting the culture and listening to everyone. He then had to figure out how to create more rapid change and a results-oriented culture. Clearly the superintendent was already strong in competency one (challenging the status quo), but to create significant change, he decided to focus on three other competencies. To begin, he needed to work on competency four (team over self) so he could develop the social capital to challenge current practices. He began to create a team that would embrace the need to change and focus on results. Another key area for him was competency two (trust). His score of 60 suggested he needed to improve. He decided to focus on improving communication both within the school and externally. His biggest challenge and the area he needed the most development in was competency three (common plan). Because he inherited a culture focused on discussion and process, he needed people to speak more directly about improving *results*. The team needed to develop one district-wide, commonly owned skinny plan with a clear sense of direction. He got the district leadership team more committed to learning and improving, and this team, as well as the principals, began reflecting on how they could improve in the seven competencies. Because the superintendent was up front about working on his own areas for improvement, the team became more amenable to working on their own improvement as well.

In addition to working on their seven competencies, leaders must also establish focus and develop the conditions necessary for sustainable success – topics the upcoming chapters will address.

Chapter 4 – Moving Compliance to the Side of Your Plate

Strangely enough, the focus on accountability actually distracts leaders from focusing on improvement. While accountability as a strategy is the result of some real concerns about education, using accountability as a *primary* strategy to drive improvement does not work. It is based on a basic lack of trust in educators, and the sheer number of hours a day needed to fulfill all compliance requirements erodes professional relationships between leaders and teachers and actually causes people to perform *less* well. Think of a batter in baseball who feels so pressured that he holds the bat too tightly to hit well. Because accountability has created a fear of failure, principals and teachers feel restricted and restrained. Yes, education is serious business, but we have lost sight of the excitement of learning and discovery. Furthermore, businesses want graduates who are curious, resilient, and entrepreneurial.

We need to shift our paradigm for creating sustainable achievement – starting with a less heavy-handed approach to accountability. The authors propose a new approach to accountability: create an engaging and exciting environment focused on results, and accountability will become a byproduct, not a goal. Accountability should be a subset of the focus on results. In a truly motivational environment deeply attentive to results, accountability will not be a problem. In one example, a principal in Devens, Massachusetts was confronted with the state’s accountability system on teacher evaluation and special education response to intervention (RTI). He believed these issues were important, but instead of putting structures into place to meet compliance requirements, he found a way to be compliant in a more *motivating* way. He started conversations with staff, administrators and parents around the important essential question: How do we balance heterogeneous and individual learning? Plus, he focused on a key driver – collaboration – so that the group could help the school succeed and make the accountability effort more engaging, too.

In this new paradigm, accountability comes from within. When compliance and external accountability are pushed to the side, and instead there is a focus on developing an engaging culture of continuous improvement, internal accountability increases. This does not mean that all a leader has to do is to be positive and motivating. No, the leader needs to create an environment in which teachers experience success and are given the critical feedback they need to move forward, it’s just that compliance is at the bottom of the list of what the leader needs to do to improve learning. Creating an exciting and motivating culture focused on results is at the top.

Building Management and Self-Management Skills

In order to have the time to create this engaging environment focused on results, leaders must be efficient in their use of time. They cannot get bogged down in compliance tasks. In contrast to the field of business, education has moved away from a focus on good management. However, a school leader cannot be successful without strong management skills in financial management, project management, forecasting, and data analysis. Learning to manage these areas will prevent compliance requirements from impeding the leader’s real work.

If you are a leader who spends most of the time putting out fires and feeling stressed, then self-management could be part of your problem. Leaders often find they spend more time reacting than acting strategically. However, the best leaders carve out the time to think strategically. As Stephen Covey described a number of years ago, leadership tasks can be put into one of four categories: (1) tasks that are urgent and important, (2) tasks that are not urgent but important, (3) tasks that are urgent and not important, and (4) tasks that are not urgent and not important.

1 Urgent Important	2 Not Urgent Important
3 Urgent Not Important	4 Not Urgent Not Important

Covey suggests that as a leader, the majority of your time should be spent in quadrants 1 and 2. Using this framework, take a moment to remove five hours per week of tasks in your calendar that are *not* results oriented (those tasks in quadrants 3 and 4). For example, when one principal did this he cut out the time he spent editing his staff’s documents. He realized this was a self-imposed requirement and he could provide training on writing and trust his staff in order to cut out this time. In another example, a principal worked with a coach to improve his management and self-management skills. The coach shadowed the principal and found that the principal did all of the morning announcements himself as a way to show the superintendent he was connecting to students and staff. The coach slowed him down, got him to be less reactive, pointed out that students didn’t even listen to the announcements, and suggested it would be more strategic to have students do the announcements. This leader was also always behind on deadlines, so the coach helped him work with the assistant principal to use a whiteboard to list all projects and deadlines. Now it’s the assistant principal who makes sure everything gets done on time.

Creative Insubordination

School leaders must remember that compliance is about completing the minimum requirements. A grade of C in compliance is fine. Some educators call this *creative insubordination*. In one example of this, a principal was required to complete written teacher evaluations – a task that took her eight hours per evaluation. Instead, the principal decided she would have much more of an impact if she spent four hours coaching each teacher on his or her goals and dreams and reduced the time she spent on writing immaculate evaluations. To take an approach like this, consider making a list of all state, federal, and district compliance tasks. Then make a chart with two columns. The first column is for items that are important to meet *your* goals for student achievement and the second column is for tasks you are willing to get a C in. Review this with a supervisor first, and then delegate tasks in the second column to your leadership team and support staff.

After simplifying your focus (chapter 1), and pushing compliance tasks to the side (chapter 4), you will have time to improve student results and accomplish more innovative tasks. So how should this time be spent? On the seven competencies outlined in chapter 2! The message of this chapter is that it is possible to reduce the amount of time spent on compliance and low-level tasks so you can free up that time for learning and focusing on results.

Chapter 5 – Staying Focused

The last chapter urged school leaders to put compliance to the side to make time for what really matters: continuous improvement. This chapter provides two examples of what that looks like. Both examples show how low-performing districts – during the particularly compliance-heavy years of 2004 to 2013 – were able to move beyond compliance and steadily, yet significantly improve student performance well beyond the state average. How did they do it? They both stayed relentlessly *focused* on getting just a few things right.

Garden Grove

South of Los Angeles, the Garden Grove school district, with just under fifty schools, had a high school graduation rate of 24 percent in 2004. The superintendent built a “stay-focused” culture that targeted six key areas. First, they were committed to the success of both students and teachers. While schools often focus on the idea that all students can learn, there is not always agreement that all *teachers* can learn. Much more than focusing on test scores, Garden Grove had the goal of *shared quality instruction* and believed that the learning of the adults was essential to making sure deep quality instruction was widespread. Second, they believed in *coherence*. Not just coherence in the planning of curriculum, assessment, and professional development, but coherence in how everyone *experienced* these elements. In many ways, coherence lies at the heart of the change process. The third area of focus was their emphasis on *relationships*. All educators felt valued starting with the welcome they got when they were hired to the personal touch the leaders put into relationships. The fourth crucial factor was a *service mentality*. As superintendent Laura Schwalm put it, “If we as leaders are not helping everyone become smarter and better, we’re not doing our job.” (p.82) *Trust and empowerment* were yet another key to their success. This did not mean leaving people alone, but rather developing the capacity of teachers and teams. This new capacity enabled staff to generate more ideas and sort out the bad ones, all of which enhanced openness and trust. The sixth area of focus was the use of *evidence* in an effort to continually improve practices. The evidence was helpful in inspiring the group to move toward new, more effective practices.

The problem in most districts is that there is a wide range of instructional practices that are all over the map. To bring coherence, districts have attempted to tighten supervision or prescribe top-down instructional practices. Neither method works because either they lead to superficial compliance or outright resistance. In contrast, Garden Grove and other districts, by combining a vision of quality instruction along with building capacity and support to do the work, have been able to get improved and sustainable results.

Sanger Unified

In Sanger Unified, a much smaller district in California, the local union put up a sign in 1999 that read, “Welcome to the home of four hundred unhappy teachers.” (p.84) At that time it was one of the lowest performing districts in the state and had been put on notice as a program-improvement district. By 2014, the district’s students had rapidly improved and the English learners had outpaced the state performance on the state academic performance index. In fact, a union leader noted that, “There is not one principal in this town that I would not work for.” How did the district do it? As the new superintendent in 2004, Marc Johnson set off on a similarly focused path as Garden Grove had done: he persistently focused on a limited number of interrelated elements. The following three principles undergirded the district’s approach:

1. Take a developmental approach to change: Because change takes time, choose a few interrelated strategies and stay focused on those, year after year.
2. Ground decisions in evidence: In order to choose priorities, look closely at student data and use feedback loops to assess and improve approaches. Use evidence to identify and refine best practices.
3. Build shared commitments and relationships to sustain change: To do this, communicate purpose, build trust, and foster ownership of effective practices.

As a result of the district’s relentless focus on these few areas of focus above, like the Garden Grove district, they were able to build relationships and get results. In fact, the district saw the following four shifts in the culture:

1. From professional isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility
2. From following the textbook to diagnosing student needs
3. From principals as managers to principals as leaders of adult learning
4. From top-down mandates and compliance to reciprocal accountability

Overall, the leaders in both Garden Grove and Sanger were able to achieve impressive results, even at a time of challenging compliance demands, because they maintained a steady focus and exemplified the seven competencies. They challenged the status quo in order to do what was right for students. They had clear expectations evident in their areas of focus. Each built trust over time by following through on the focus areas. Both leaders believed in team over self and worked to have a commonly owned plan that they continually reviewed. Data was used to continuously refine the work, not blame individuals. The sense of urgency came from both external and internal forces. The leaders put their time into building relationships and they worked to develop leaders. Overall, the two leaders modeled the seven competencies every day in their work.

Chapter 6 – Have a “Come Work With Us” Quality

If you remember the movie *Field of Dreams*, you know the famous line, “If you build it, they will come.” This movie shows that if you create a dream and believe in it, the impossible can become a reality. True, schools are not Hollywood, but they can become places where families come to fulfill their hopes and dreams. When schools start to fulfill those dreams, word will spread and your good staff members will want to *stay* while new talented people will want to *come*. Developing the seven competencies will help turn those dreams into reality. However, if you do not intentionally both attract and develop the most qualified people, *they will leave*. Not only are most talented people looking for a reason to stay in your school, but talented people come in swarms and will bring other skilled educators to your school as well.

So what kind of environment are these talented people looking for? One in which they feel safe and energized at the same time. A place where they feel that everyone wants them to succeed. A place where they have time to think and be strategic. A place where they feel engaged and proud of making a difference in students’ lives. Talented people want to love their work and enjoy working with peers to accomplish incredible things. So how do you create an environment like this? Below are five key areas to address to build an environment like this.

1. Hire a Capacity Leader as Your Superintendent

Research from the Wallace Foundation along with other research shows that finding the best *teachers* is the top factor in improving student achievement and finding the best *principal* is the number two factor. Therefore, districts need a superintendent who can, despite the compliance mandates, pressures, budget constraints, and worries about safety, create a district that is an energizing and exciting place that attracts and retains the most talented staff. To do this, districts should hire a superintendent who is a *capacity leader* – a leader who knows how to find and develop the right people. Capacity leaders know how to distribute leadership and create a culture of empowerment that is focused on results while also establishing the type of creative, enjoyable learning environment where people want to work. Too often, a visionary superintendent is hired to create change, but then gets mired in politics, clashes with the board, or falls prey to accountability pressures. We need stable superintendents who remain on the job and create sustainable change throughout the district.

2. Build a Team of Capacity Leaders

The superintendent who is a capacity leader knows how important it is to hire the best people. This means the superintendent must free up her own time to be the district’s top recruiter – relentlessly looking for talent everywhere from conferences and meetings to casual conversations. A strong superintendent knows that in education, while we often have very inclusive hiring processes, sometimes too much process can be a problem when there’s a particularly promising candidate.

In addition to putting time into hiring the best people, there is still work to be done to *keep* those people. To do this, the superintendent must prioritize building and developing a high-performance team. The best superintendents work with each and every administrator on developing his or her leadership capacities. This can be done by starting with everyone on the leadership team taking some type of leadership assessment (assessing the seven capabilities, using a 360-degree review process, or assessing emotional intelligence). For this to be successful, the superintendent should only *hire* those willing to examine their own strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the superintendent herself must model continual development by sharing her own leadership profiles with the team.

3. *Unleash the Power of Teacher Leaders*

Teacher leaders are our great untapped source of instructional improvement. One teacher noted that principals are usually too busy to be true instructional leaders. They are often not that visible and frequently give abbreviated feedback to teachers in the hall – not a deep way to develop teachers. Further, Michael Fullan found that there is a growing *micromanagement madness* from principals that does not lead to improved student achievement. While school districts are calling for principals to be instructional leaders, this is just not reasonable to expect. Yes, principals should be knowledgeable about pedagogy, but that does not mean they should work with each teacher individually. Instead, they should lead the *group*. Furthermore, by simplifying initiatives and plans and decreasing time spent on compliance, this frees up principals to have more time to develop instructional leadership teams and to encourage peers to give each other feedback to improve. Developing instructional leadership teams is a high-impact strategy that can help the principal and assistant principal improve results.

4. *Create the Buzz of Success*

With the right leaders and teams in place, it is critical to infuse the environment with positive energy to retain those people. When leaders exude positive energy, this often leads to positive workplaces. However, this does not fit with everyone's leadership style. In one school the principal realized he was more of an introvert. Because he had had his leadership team members assess their leadership styles, he knew he was more of a behind-the-scenes type, but he had some highly energetic people on his team. However, he realized they felt constrained by his style so he had to coach them to come forth and utilize their positive energy to create excitement at the school. Nevertheless, positive energy doesn't always need a loud cheerleader. In fact, some people are motivated by quieter private conversations and reflective learning.

Principals should be encouraged to take risks to create positive environments for innovation. At companies like Google and Amazon they find ways to create fun environments. For example, they have ping pong tables for staff to take a break. While we are often afraid to do this in education, there are things we can do to create more positive morale. One superintendent was so focused on results, he was surprised to see that he received a poor review for *morale* in the district. As a result, he decided to host leadership team meetings at a different school each week and have district staff serve breakfast with a theme (like Pancake Day) to the local staff at the school. In addition to literally and symbolically serving the staff, he also conducted a series of meetings with each school's staff members asking how the district could improve morale. He learned that while the district was successful in driving results, it was weak in building ownership and listening skills, areas he could have the district team work to improve.

5. *Formalize the Program to Attract and Develop Talent*

Many industries have realized the value of talent development and have prioritized it. Somehow, in education we have not excelled at recruiting and building talent. Instead, we focus on instructional leadership and simply hope we can “advertise for positions, and they will come.” But the pool of quality candidates has been slowly shrinking, so we end up hiring whoever is available and hope for the best. Instead, we need to intentionally seek out high-quality candidates and build cultures where those people want to work. This means moving beyond simply relying on advertisements as your main source of applicants. Instead, proactively identify where you will find the best people and plan for how you will attract them to apply. Get recommendations from people you respect and do more than read a candidate's letter of recommendation. One superintendent sees his job as meeting individually with candidates, selling the district to potential hires, and insisting on putting in a temporary person rather than settling when hiring.

We can't assume that because a person has the right degrees that she will be a capacity builder. In fact, those with the top skills are often *not* the best at developing people. A key saying is to hire for attitude and train for skills. One way to look beyond degrees and skills is to consider using *leadership assessments* as part of the hiring process. A number of businesses use assessments such as DiSC and the Workplace Personality Inventory when hiring.

Furthermore, talent management is a *continuous* process. After hiring the right people, strong leaders know that to *keep* that talent they need to repeatedly assess for fit. While the candidate might initially be a fit, people's *fit factor* can change. *Fit* includes the interests, skills, environment, opportunity, and work-life balance. For example, someone might have the skills for a position, but not be interested in it. A great teacher who was a perfect fit for a job initially, might have a change in family situation that necessitates a more flexible schedule. Good leaders know they must continually speak with staff to determine fit factor and make any necessary adjustments in order to retain talented individuals. While this may seem like a great deal of work, finding and keeping talent is key to success. Developing a “come work with us” culture is part of the interconnected effort to make schools more effective as described in this book. Making things simpler and more focused, moving compliance to the side to prioritize capacity building, and creating the type of workplace talented people want to join and remain at, are all crucial components in improving schools and school systems.

Chapter 7 – Successful Leaders Under All Circumstances

Whether you lead in an urban, suburban, or rural district, you face similar daunting challenges: too many initiatives, too much compliance, and too many distractions. But what leaders who are successful in all of these different settings have in common is their ability to utilize the seven competencies to lead in an open and innovative way in order to get results. These leaders are open to new ideas and seek out partnerships, they are clear about their strengths and weaknesses, and they listen to critical feedback to get better at their job every day. They are able to be continuous learners because they know how to focus on what is important and put compliance aside.

Strong Leaders Do Not Let Fear Stop Them

Why doesn't fear stop the best leaders? Many leaders simply comply with mandates because they fear what will happen if they don't. This fear prevents them from focusing on results. However, it turns out that leaders who exemplify the seven competencies not only do *not* get in trouble, in fact, they actually achieve greater impact from not prioritizing compliance. Of course they *do* get into trouble from time to time, but they are able to manage this because they have strong professional and local political confidence. If a leader has successfully built capacity, then those who have been affected by this are likely to protect the leader if higher authorities threaten him or her. When leaders – as part of the seven competencies – take the time to build a solid political constituency, they have greater power and influence and do not need to fear higher authorities.

Strong Leaders Do Not Let External Conditions Stop Them

The best leaders do not let external conditions stop them from focusing on results. For example, during tough financial times, many leaders scale back or abandon the important and innovative work that needs to be done. Yes, resources are important, but the strongest leaders do not let budget problems interfere with their focus. They are proactive about financial planning. For example, many leaders dive into new initiatives without knowing whether they will get results. This often leads to a waste of scarce resources. For example, leaders often send their staff out for professional development without taking the time to evaluate how much of an impact these programs will have. Furthermore, they don't always ensure that upon return, staff share what they have learned from that professional development in order to maximize the benefit of this resource. A similar problem occurs when principals invest resources in coaching and simply assume that those who are strong in a content area are also good at coaching other people for improved results.

Instead, when budgets need to be reduced, strong leaders take a careful look at the value different strategies and initiatives provide. In other words, they take a results-orientation approach to resources. Second, higher-performing leaders spend time developing partnerships, which brings in both revenue and support so the school or district will not be as hard hit during difficult economic times.

Strong Leaders Make Time to Connect

School leaders may feel they don't have the time for social networking, yet this is a key aspect of competency seven – “builds external networks and partnerships.” The best leaders regularly use social media as a way to engage with other likeminded innovative and fearless leaders trying to improve their schools and districts and create places of joy for students and staff. How do these leaders find the time? Again, they de-emphasize compliance and spend less time on compliance chores such as attending statewide meetings announcing new initiatives. Instead of spending time on these perfunctory duties, great leaders gain a great deal of energy and excitement from connecting with other capacity-building leaders. Whether they do this through national conferences, visits to each others' schools, or online (such as through WebEx or GoToMeeting), leaders who develop competency seven are better able to cope with and thrive in this new environment.

Chapter 8 – Creating System Breakthroughs – You Are Needed

Leaders who exemplify the seven competencies, do more than improve education at the local level. They also question how the overall system works and help to counteract the *wrong* policy drivers introduced in chapter 1: standards, assessments, monitoring, and interventions. They know that a carrot-and-stick approach to accountability will not truly improve schools and instead focus on capacity building, working as a team, and abandoning the overload of initiatives. This type of approach serves to build *internal accountability* in which the group is responsible for its own performance.

While the four wrong drivers operate at the larger macro level, effective leaders are using the *right* drivers at the local level. But there are a growing number of these leaders with a common agenda of creating whole-system change. For example, Michael Fullan is working with over a thousand schools on “new pedagogies for deep learning” (<http://npdl.global/>) because they believe schools are not addressing 21st century skills. Instead, the deep learning they are focusing on includes: collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, character, and citizenship. To create this type of change, we need two things: (1) leaders who cultivate the seven competencies and can develop other leaders with these competencies and (2) *Leadership from the Middle (LFtM)* as described below.

Leadership from the Middle

Based on their study of ten school districts in Ontario, Andy Hargreaves and Henry Braun developed the term *Leadership from the Middle* (LFtM). These researchers found that the *middle* (in this case the government is the center, the school districts are the middle, and the local schools are the lower level) has tremendous power to create change. When the middle is led well, it can come up with insightful ideas, create buy-in, and get stronger accountability through transparent data and results. Part of this is because top-down change rarely works and bottom-up change results in some schools improving while others don't. Instead, the middle has the potential to create the most impactful system change. The same thinking applies to individual districts. In that case, the *schools* are in the middle and are the ones with the power to create change within the district.

Right now Michael Fullan and his team are part of a massive LFtM campaign in California. They are part of a movement in which groups of districts have decided to work together for three or more years on specific changes. For example, they've worked on overhauling the funding formula for schools, changing the state accountability framework, and working with the Association of California School Administrators (with over 16,000 members) to help develop leadership competencies among their members. It doesn't matter whether you are a school or district leader, the point is that you can have a larger role in improving the system. And this role begins with developing the seven competencies outlined in this book.

Developing the Seven Competencies

No one is perfect at all seven of the competencies, but the best leaders strive to improve in them. For your own improvement process, you can begin by completing a self-assessment on the seven competencies (outlined on p.2 of the summary) to help determine which are your strong areas and your areas for improvement. You can ask a trusted colleague, a supervisor, or your team to assess you on these seven areas as well. It is also helpful to use data from your last few evaluations to pinpoint areas to work on. Another popular practice is to complete a leadership inventory like the one Kirtman developed based on the Workplace Personality Inventory.

Once you have determined your areas for improvement, choose one or two areas to start and go through the steps below. For example, you could take the following steps for competency two -- "builds trust through clear communication and expectations."

- Look at the traits listed under competency two and choose the ones you need to work on, based on any data you have (evaluations, 360 reviews, or self- or team-assessments). For example you may find you have difficulty being direct with people which connects to the first trait, "is direct and honest about performance expectations."
- Explore why you have difficulty in this area, in this case, providing direct feedback. Are you worried about hurting relationships? Are you uncomfortable pointing out areas for improvement?
- Determine the right strategies for you to improve: In this case, perhaps you need to learn to provide more direct feedback.
- Learn the new strategies: You may need to attend a training program, read a book, or have conversations to develop the strategy of providing more direct feedback.
- Repeat this process with other traits under this competency: Continue to analyze data about yourself to determine if there are other traits under competency two that you need to work on. For example, you might find you also need to work on the second trait, "follows through with actions on all commitments."

Some leaders hire a coach to help them with these competencies. Others, like Patrick Sweeney the superintendent in Napa Valley, have their entire cabinet work together to improve their seven capacities so they can learn from each other and develop common improvement strategies. In fact, Sweeney's district embedded the seven competencies in a number of ways: in hiring practices, professional development, and performance evaluations.

When leaders delve into and work on developing the seven competencies, they can lead anywhere and anytime. They can help to change the system by becoming *system players* who both contribute to and benefit from the bigger system. Overall, there is a new movement with a new form of leadership arriving, and you can join the club!

THE MAIN IDEA’s PD suggestions for Kirtman & Fullan’s Leadership: Key Competencies for Whole-System Change

Are you looking for a good way to develop your leadership team this summer? Lyle Kirtman’s seven competencies for school leadership provides an excellent lens through which to examine the strengths and areas for improvement for everyone on your leadership team.

I. Have the leadership team learn about the seven competencies

Before school leaders can determine their own strengths and areas for improvement in the seven competencies, they need to understand what each competency means. After you’ve read the summary and have a clearer idea of what they mean, discuss each of the seven with your group. Below are some discussion questions. You can discuss these leadership concepts in general *or* you can share actual examples of leaders displaying these qualities.

Guiding questions to discuss the seven competencies before filling out the chart below:

1. *(Status Quo) – In what ways do compliance tasks impede the real work in schools? Have you seen any examples of a leader employing “creative insubordination” in order to keep the school’s priorities intact? How can schools be accountable if compliance isn’t a priority?*
2. *(Trust) -- What does it mean for a leader to “walk the walk”? Can you think of an example of a leader not following through on a commitment? What was the impact? What are ways leaders at our school use communication consistently and clearly?*
3. *(Commonly Owned Plan) -- What is the difference between a “fat plan” and a “skinny plan”? Which do we have in this school/district? What are the primary benefits of developing a skinny plan? Can you name the top priorities of the school/district? What are important steps to ensure that a plan has buy-in?*
4. *(Focus on Team) – How can a leader focus on getting the right people on the leadership team? Once the team has been formed, what steps can the leader take to continually develop the team? Why must the leader help the group focus on outcomes rather than direct how the group does its work? In what ways can a leader create a “come work with us” quality at the school/district? How might the leader regularly check for fit factor?*
5. *(Sense of Urgency) – Why is it important for the leader to move forward, even sometimes without consensus? How does developing a culture that is data driven help create a sense of urgency? What is the difference between a reactive and a strategic type of urgency?*
6. *(Continuous Improvement) – How do you know if a leader is a voracious learner? What role does a leader’s ability to listen play in her commitment to continual improvement? What skills must a leader have in order to focus on continuous learning rather than putting out fires?*
7. *(Networks) – In what ways can the leader connect with others outside of the school building, even those outside the field of education? Why is it important for the leader to take time to use social media to further those connections?*

After discussing the seven competencies, distribute the chart below and have leaders work in pairs to write down what each competency means and what it *doesn’t* mean. You may be familiar with this exercise from teachers using it to introduce new vocabulary/concepts to students to help them gain a deeper understanding (a teacher might introduce terms like ‘polynomials’ or ‘vertebrates’ with this method).

<i>Developing a Better Understanding of the Seven Competencies</i>	
EXAMPLES	NON-EXAMPLES
1. Challenges the Status Quo:	Challenges the Status Quo:
2. Builds Trust Through Clear Communication and Expectations:	Builds Trust Through Clear Communication and Expectations:
3. Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success:	Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success:
4. Focuses on Team Over Self:	Focuses on Team Over Self:
5. Has Urgency for Change & Sustainable Results in Student Achievement:	Has Urgency for Change & Sustainable Results in Student Achievement:
6. Commits to Continuous Improvement for Self and Organization:	Commits to Continuous Improvement for Self and Organization:
7. Builds External Networks and Partnerships:	Builds External Networks and Partnerships:

II. Have the leadership team assess their own leadership competencies and create an action plan to improve

A. Complete the Self-Assessment: As a leader, you can assess yourself individually, but it would be even better if you provided a copy of this self-assessment to your entire leadership team and asked each person to complete it. In addition to people assessing themselves, they might confirm their results by checking in with a trusted colleague or supervisor to determine if others see the same strengths and areas for improvement. If it is comfortable to do so, discuss these results as a leadership group.

Kirtman's Seven Competencies for School Leadership		Self-Rating (1 to 5, 1 = needs improvement, 5 = very strong)
1.	Challenges the Status Quo a. Delegates compliance tasks and does not let rules and regulations impede results b. Challenges traditional practices that block improvements c. Is willing to take risks d. Looks for innovations that get results	1. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____
2.	Builds Trust Through Clear Communication and Expectations a. Is direct about performance expectations b. Follows through on all commitments c. Clarifies understandings in written and verbal communication d. Deals with conflict	2. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____
3.	Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success a. Creates written plans and ensures buy in b. Monitors implementation of plans, adjusts based on new data, and communicates changes c. Ensures goals are measured d. Creates short- and long-term plans	3. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____
4.	Focuses on Team Over Self a. Hires the best people for the team b. Commits to the development of a high-performing leadership team c. Builds a team environment d. Seeks critical feedback e. Empowers staff to make decisions and get results f. Supports the professional development of all staff	4. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____ e. ____ f. ____
5.	High Sense of Urgency for Change and Sustainable Results in Student Achievement a. Is able to decisively move initiatives ahead quickly b. Uses instructional data to support needed change c. Builds systemic strategies to ensure sustainability of change d. Sets a clear direction for the organization e. Is able to deal with and manage change effectively	5. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____ e. ____
6.	Commits to Continuous Improvement for Self and Organization a. Has a high sense of curiosity for new ways to get results b. Changes current practices for self and others willingly c. Listens to all team members to change practices to obtain results d. Takes responsibility for own actions – no excuses e. Uses strong self-management and self-reflection skills	6. Overall (take the average of below) a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____ e. ____
7.	Builds External Networks and Partnerships a. Sees his/her role as a leader outside of the work environment and community walls b. Understands his/her role as a being part of a variety of external networks for change c. Has a strong ability to engage people inside and outside the school in two-way partnerships d. Uses technology to expand and manage a network of resource people	7. Overall (take the average of below) ____ a. ____ b. ____ c. ____ d. ____

B. Choose One or Two Areas to Improve – Once all leaders have completed the assessment above and discussed the results as a group or with a trusted colleague, have each person pick only one or two areas to improve. Then have the group commit to the underlined steps below for improvement (from the book) and create a timeline with deadlines for each step. Note that after each general underlined step below is an example of how a leader might go about improving in *competency two*:

Here are sample steps a leader could take to improve *competency two* -- “builds trust through clear communication and expectations.”

- Look at the traits listed under competency two and choose the ones you need to work on, based on any data you have (evaluations, 360 reviews, or self- or team-assessments). For example, you may find you have difficulty being direct with people which connects to the first trait, “is direct and honest about performance expectations.”
- Explore why you have difficulty in this area, in this case, providing direct feedback. Are you worried about hurting relationships or are you uncomfortable pointing out areas for improvement?
- Determine the right strategies for you to improve: In this case, perhaps you need to learn to provide more direct feedback.
- Learn the new strategies: You may need to attend a training program, read a book (see The Main Idea’s archives!) or have conversations to develop the strategy of providing more direct feedback.
- Repeat this process with other traits under this competency: Continue to analyze data about yourself to determine if there are other traits under *competency two* that you need to work on. For example, you might find you also need to work on the second trait, “follows through with actions on all commitments.”