

## Chapter 3

# Learning to Lead in the Midst of Complex Times: A Window into the Nature of School Leaders' Work Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

*The authors interviewed and surveyed principals from Bermuda and four regions of the US about what they name as their more pressing challenges and how they manage them. The challenges they named are composed of both adaptive and technical work (Heifetz, 1994), which required leaders, teachers, and community members to change. More specifically, regardless of how principals interpreted their challenges, i.e., technical, adaptive, or mixed, a common part of their response was to foster professional growth and development—or learning—as part of the solution. Leaders typically focused on caring for the learning of others, yet at times they needed to stretch their own learning curves. Leaders supported faculty and staff by developing informational, transformational, and mixed learning experiences as tools to help faculty and staff work through their part of these complex challenges. Leadership preparation programs are encouraged to address managing phases of adaptive, technical, and mixed challenges.*

### INTRODUCTION

Given the current educational climate globally and the implicit and explicit complex demands that school leaders are encountering every day, researchers, scholars and practitioners alike are investing tremendous amounts of energy and

thought into discovering better ways to more effectively prepare leaders in preparation programs and to support practicing and aspiring leaders on the ground to better manage the challenges that arise spontaneously in-the-midst of their complex and heroic work. It's difficult to prepare for these kinds of challenges because they are often unforeseen and that were not part of their leadership preparation programs. In addition, there are

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very few professional development opportunities for leaders in the field that would help them to a) understand the challenge, b) effectively manage it, and c) work through it in ways that would simultaneously help them to cope with it and use it as an opportunity to support growth and learning (Barber, 2006; Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2007; Donaldson, 2008; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Murnane & Willett, 2010; Peterson, 2002; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011). Our longitudinal research with school leaders shows that they face a variety of challenges many of which stem from local and national mandates and accountability policies that are unique to each region or country context (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Hoffman, 2011; Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, Hoffman, & Barbaro, 2012; Leithwood & Beatty, 2007).

Finding ways to better equip leaders to manage the complex challenges they face is critical especially since around the world they are increasingly encountering what leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz (1994) calls “adaptive challenges” (p. 8). Adaptive challenges (e.g., improving instructional quality, developing teacher and leader evaluation systems and linking educators’ performance to student achievement) require something more than newly acquired skill sets or more information. Instead, adaptive challenges are 1) difficult to identify (i.e., the problems are so murky that it’s hard to identify *what the problem is*) and 2) there are no known solutions or experts to assist with solving them. Put more simply and complexly, the problems are difficult to identify and solutions do not yet exist. Thus, they require new approaches, new internal capacities, and new ways of being in relationship to problems in order to solve problems while in the field (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006; Wagner, 2007). In essence, these kinds of challenges require us to manage tremendous amounts of complexity and ambiguity and, in turn, they demand not only the *capacity to learn* while managing one’s way through them, but also require the developmental (internal cognitive, emotional,

interpersonal and intrapersonal) capacity to handle the complexity and ambiguity inherent in such challenges (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Wagner, 2007).

But what, more specifically, are the challenges that principals, directors, head masters, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and others confront in their day-to-day practice? What do they name as the pressing challenges in their leadership work? How do they describe and make sense of them? Our chapter addresses these questions from the perspectives of the leaders who participated in our longitudinal research.

## **BACKGROUND**

*It’s a great job, you can make an impact on many kids and many teachers...it’s a wonderful job, it’s becoming more complex...so is everything in education, it’s becoming more and more complex (US Middle School Principal).*

Given the complexities of leading in today’s educational world, as portrayed in the middle school principal’s words, we know a few things for sure. First, it is clear that principals, no matter how effective and thoughtful they are, cannot lead alone. Second, we know that principals, and all educators for that matter, need support to do their best work and to thrive in doing it. They need opportunities to grow and to learn. They must join together for the sake of supporting children, youth and themselves. In other words, all educators must join together in collaboration to share leadership. Last, supporting all educators in their demanding work will decrease isolation, alleviate stress and burnout, and—in turn, support retention.

In our ever-changing world there is a palpable need for leadership preparation programs to develop curricula and offer classes that help to build aspiring and practicing leaders’ internal capacities to manage complexity. In addition, there is a need to find better ways to support leaders in

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