

# INTRODUCTION

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When I was a new principal, at the end of each day I could usually be found puzzling over that day's dilemma. Looking back, I'm sure there wasn't a dilemma every single day, but at the time it seemed like it. Besides being challenged by the people-centered situations that occur on every school campus, I also felt inundated with a tsunami of tasks, meetings, and community members who all wanted to talk to me. As a teacher, I was in control of my schedule and had the ability to decompress after students had left at the end of the day. As a principal, I quickly learned that "before school" and "afterschool" was not downtime to complete the compliance-oriented functions of my job that needed to be done. Those hours were filled with conversations with parents, staff members, and students and were frequently related to that day's dilemma.

Because of the weight of the dilemmas (those situations always felt "heavy" to me), I felt that the process of making a sound decision was as essential as the outcome. Making personal connections to truly understand all aspects of an issue through deliberate questioning and careful listening is essential to get to the heart of the matter. These efforts signaled to others that I valued them and the situation at hand. Sending an e-mail was a last resort if I wasn't able to make contact with someone. Even people who do not agree with your decisions appreciate when the principal is visible, accessible, and transparent with decision-making processes. I found these "touchpoints" to be vital to my success as a principal.

These touchpoints—authentically connecting, listening, and collaborating with people—became hallmarks of my leadership style. I quickly learned to seek people out before they came looking for me. I began to prepare for meetings days in advance so that I would always

be available and present for the day's events. I had my fair share of dilemmas as a new principal; although some felt lighter than others, all were extremely heavy to those involved.

Over the past 13 years as a school principal, I have studied the actions of a range of educators, some highly effective, and others less skilled. These observations, coupled with my introspective nature, have allowed me to hone particular strategies to effectively manage diverse school communities and foster student achievement. Because of the demanding nature of the principalship, I also employed practices to relax and reenergize; these routines helped me to decompress and manage all of the administrative tasks while actualizing an educational vision for students. I explain these self-care strategies by detailing each in relation to school leadership.

This leadership framework puts you in the driver's seat. It is flexible in that you are able to align it to your own core values. When this alignment exists, you feel balanced and in control—both personally and professionally. Being an effective leader in today's diverse school communities is not easy, nor is it simple. The field of education has changed drastically in the 21st century, making the work of educating students significantly more challenging. Education policies and standards have changed, teaching practices have changed, and the students we serve have changed. To be the leaders our society needs us to be, instructional pedagogy and operational expertise are necessary but are not enough; it is through skillful interactions, collaboration, and reflective leadership that we will achieve our school missions.

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## THE ETHICAL LINE

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When I first started thinking about the ethical behavior of school leaders, I imagined a line on the ground that divided ethical actions from unethical actions. I came to understand that each of us has our own ethical line. Our ethical line is our moral compass—the voice in our head that guides our thoughts and actions. The way I see it, as we go about our typical day all of us walk atop of our ethical lines. Stepping off the line for the right reason doesn't make you an unethical person. Educators actually need to step off the line sometimes to make decisions

that are in the best interest of students. We need to do this because there isn't always a rule or policy that applies to a given situation or following the policy would actually be a disservice to the child in question. In one sense, we step off of our line when we choose not to adhere to a policy. On the other hand, we also are true to our ethical line if we do this to act in the best interest of a child or group of children. As our leadership skills develop, we become aware of the many situations that don't have easy answers. The "right" or "ethical" answer isn't always simple or apparent. Decision making depends quite a lot on context and consequences. Our decision-making patterns in wealthy, private schools will likely look different from the decisions we make when we are serving in struggling communities. The needs are different, so our considerations and priorities also need to be different. When we change contexts or consider situations from a different point of view, we might find that our ethical line shifts slightly. To ensure that we continue to act ethically and in the best interests of our students, it's critical that we continually practice self-reflection to check to see if we're making decisions for the right reasons.

Our actions, both conscious and unconscious, are influenced by our values, habits, cultural orientations, and past experiences. These aspects of character also drive the ways in which we approach dilemmas, essentially establishing our own personal ethical line. Given the wide range of issues and pressures that school leaders face, chances are we will make some mistakes along the way. We will make errors in judgment. We are not perfect; no one is. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility to maintain our ethical line, to lead by example, and to help others to work through issues when conflicts arise.

Our integrity will be most in demand during times of conflict. Times of conflict are challenging and demanding, but they are also opportunities for growth and development. By paying attention to the challenges we face now, we will be able to improve our future behaviors and decisions. Furthermore, defining moments (discussed in Strategy #10) reveal opportunities to learn from others, as well as guide other people. We must remind ourselves that dilemmas are made more complex because of the conflicting needs of the people involved. When we find ourselves in such situations, it is important that we examine our biases

and instincts, making an effort to view the dilemma from multiple angles and multiple points of view. As leaders we often feel the need to satisfy people who have a wide range of values, interests, and agendas. Making decisions during these trying times further cements our character, both as a moment of our own personal growth and how others perceive who we are and what we stand for. More often than not, we have to accept the fact that we will have to disappoint some people in order to move forward toward the ultimate goal of serving students' best interests.

As I reflect upon the past 13 years as a school leader, I am reminded of a line from one of Emily Dickinson's letters to a friend (Higginson, 1891): "The sailor cannot see the North, but knows the needle can." Whenever I felt overcome in a sea of complex challenges and competing interests, I learned to trust my moral compass to guide me. Attentively adhering to this ethical line has helped me proceed with confidence and peace of mind. Pausing for self-reflection allows my core beliefs and values to shape my behavior. Acting upon your core beliefs is critical to successfully and effectively leading in a manner that is consistent, purposeful, and ethical.

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## TEMPTATIONS LURK EVERYWHERE

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People generally expect those in the public eye to behave ethically, although glaring exceptions from Wells Fargo, Volkswagen, Uber, and The Weinstein Company all suggest these organizations have struggled with internal integrity issues and ethical decision making. Scandals involving school administrators cheating on high-stakes tests, having affairs with students, and accounts of financial mismanagement prove that educators are not immune to moral failings.

People are human; we struggle to make good choices all the time. We are continually tempted to overeat, stay up too late, and to veer from a preplanned budget. While these personal behaviors may be trivial, cutting corners professionally can lead to significant negative consequences. Therefore, as educators who have been entrusted with the community's most prized treasure—their children—we must take steps to adhere to a high ethical standard. For as Nancy Tuana, an American philosopher and director of the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State,

has said, ethical proficiency is a “lifelong achievement, for we find ourselves confronted with new, and sometimes unique, ethical issues throughout our lifetimes” (Tuana, 2014, p. 154). Ethical leadership is not likely to happen unintentionally or by instinct. Sadly, most of us have had little to no formal training in ethics or in the nature of ethical decision making. Therefore, it is my hope that this book can offer structured guidance on how to pause and reflect on your own personal values and commitments as well as some tools and strategies for applying rigorous ethical thoughtfulness to complex decisions. The goal is to be prepared ahead of time. Chances are that sometime in the near future you will be faced with temptations—to ignore injustice, to take the easy path, to make decisions in isolation, to not put in the time and effort to consider the consequences of potential decisions. When those temptations arise, it is my hope that you will already have at your fingertips effective tools to tackle ethical dilemmas responsibly and ethically.

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## TOUGH CHOICES

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Education leaders are forced to make tough choices. Tough choices don’t always involve criminal laws, codes of conduct, or headline-worthy issues. Sometimes the struggle involves our tightly held core values being in conflict with one another. Tough choices are typically the ones that pit one “right” value against another “right” value. Consider this dilemma: A student confesses that he accidentally brought a Swiss Army knife to school this morning. He had it in his backpack when he went to a Scouts meeting last night. He tells you that he thought he had removed it, but he must have forgotten. “Are you going to suspend me?” he asks, with tears in his eyes. This student is at the top of the class and has never been in trouble. Your inclination is to make this a teachable moment, but there is a zero-tolerance policy for weapons at the school. What do you do? During cases of right versus wrong, there is usually a clear path of action to take, thus allowing us to make a good decision, and move on. The really tough choices, then, don’t focus on right versus wrong. They involve right versus right decisions, or ethical dilemmas. These are genuine dilemmas because each side is deeply rooted in one of our core values. In this case, we value the right of this child to an

education (i.e., not being suspended), but we also value upholding a strong practice of security and a practice where no one receives special treatment. Which is the most ethical decision?

Other ethical dilemmas might arise such as: What does employee discipline look like after a child is injured during the short period of time when an ailing teacher left her students unsupervised? How should you proceed when two middle school teachers begin a visible romance on your campus? What should be done when a white teacher disciplines an energetic black student by sending her to another class because the teacher “needs a break”? These dilemmas are both routine and extremely challenging. They require solid judgment to make a worthy resolution. Rarely do educators receive any training in thinking through complex situations to arrive at responses that are fair, legal, and in the best interests of students. These problems are ethical challenges of equity, inclusion, fairness, and human rights.

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### HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP

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This book is your guide to successfully navigating the complex circumstances that school leaders face in today’s complex and diverse societies. Training in reflection, ethical action, and how to avoid decision-making traps are crucial to one’s personal well-being, professional character, and to the treatment and opportunities offered to our students. The goal of this book is to provide structured opportunities for you to reflect on your own values and leadership practices while offering strategies and decision-making processes that rest on a foundation of ethical behaviors.

By considering your own values, beliefs, and biases now, in the future you will:

- Have confidence that you have the skills to expose the ethical considerations and implications of problems faced by leaders in diverse environments
- Be certain that your decision-making processes are sound and improve educational outcomes for students
- Feel empowered to do right by students, while reducing or eliminating harmful practices that marginalize groups of students

## FEATURES YOU WILL FIND

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- 10 strategies that can be applied to prevent or overcome future problematic situations
- 10 true case-study examples from current educators that readers can use to examine the ethical aspects of common issues facing school leaders
- Activities in each chapter that encourage you to apply the lessons of the chapter to your own context
- Reflective questions in each chapter prompting you to consider your own values while weighing the various aspects of an ethical dilemma to help shape your future leadership actions
- A discussion of Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Standard 2: *Ethics and Professional Norms* and Standard 3: *Equity and Cultural Responsiveness* so that you are better informed of your obligations to students
- Tools that foster collaborative leadership by enlisting the cooperation of staff and community members

Effectively and ethically leading schools through the new and unique demands of today's world begins in our schools and requires leaders who have a vision that ensures all groups of students not only learn but feel welcomed, supported, and valued—not in spite of their differences but because of them. This type of leadership requires courage and an ability to collaborate with others, because it's not possible for one person, no matter how effective or ethical, to nourish and sustain a community alone. While this responsibility is shared, it starts at the top. The principal's commitment to ethical and inclusive practices must permeate the school community at all levels—to staff, families, and students—such that each individual considers himself or herself to be an ethical leader.

I constantly and consciously seek to balance my personal beliefs with those of my school community. I am fully aware that my upbringing as a Caucasian female has afforded me certain privileges that have shaped the person I am today. I must regularly ask myself: *What am I trying to achieve? Which values am I signaling, both intentionally and*

*unintentionally, to my students and my school community?* I would like to believe that my actions are sincere efforts to be culturally responsive to my students, school community, and my organization. I strive to maintain a culture of feedback such that I can understand my impact. To maintain my ethical line, I depend on these 10 strategies:

### Strategies for Successful and Ethical Leadership

Strategy #1: Identify and Model Your Core Values

Strategy #2: Be Curiously Introspective

Strategy #3: Listen Generously

Strategy #4: Create an Inclusive School Climate

Strategy #5: Discover Your Community's Hopes and Dreams

Strategy #6: Unify Around a Collective Vision

Strategy #7: Consider Moral and Legal Consequences of Decisions

Strategy #8: Ensure Equitable Processes and Outcomes

Strategy #9: Walk the Talk

Strategy #10: Become a Strategic Influencer

Ethics is at the heart of good leadership. Every choice an education leader makes is based upon a particular context and is influenced by her or his experiences, values, and cultural orientations. Each chapter of this book focuses on two to four of these strategies, offering examples, tools, activities, and questions for reflection. The case studies presented in each chapter are derived from diverse contexts. They describe complex dilemmas that should cause you to pause and carefully consider how you might handle the situation for the benefit of all. As you read each case study, I invite you to widen your gaze and shift your perspective to consider all angles of the situation and the perspective of each key figure. These case studies are an opportunity for you to imagine expanding your metacognitive and leadership skills while nurturing the



health and well-being of your school community. It is my dream that ultimately every child in your care will benefit because you took the tenets in this book to heart. I hope this book will help you consciously identify your core values, so that you can lead always staying true to your own ethical line.

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