

Foreword

There is something you should know about Sarah Fiarman that you might not necessarily glean from this book: Sarah Fiarman is a *force of nature*; relentlessly upbeat, positive, and optimistic; energetic beyond the bounds of human possibility; possessed of a mind that can generate scores of ideas in a matter of minutes; acute in her capacity to sense and listen while at the same time acting; and, as if these dispositions weren't enough, a funny, kind, and self-effacing human being. Since I require considerable remedial support on most of these dimensions, I have always viewed Sarah with deep respect and, like an approaching hurricane, with a degree of caution and alarm.

How do I know these things about Sarah? Sarah and I worked together for a considerable period during her graduate studies at Harvard at a particularly yeasty time when we were developing and teaching practices of improvement for teachers and school leaders. I confess that when I heard Sarah was moving into a leadership position at “Douglass”—the school that is featured in this book—I felt a deep loss of her collegueship and a degree of concern that the school and district in which she had chosen to work would not appreciate her special qualities as a leader, teacher, and human being. I confess that I have this feeling a lot these days, as my former students become colleagues and leaders in the field. I am less concerned about their preparation for the work than I am about whether the systems they are entering are capable of making use of their considerable talents.

As I might have expected, Sarah has crammed a career's worth of powerful insight and advice about leadership into a deceptively compact

and accessible book. In the thirty-some years of this current period of education “reform,” a massive industry has developed around the theory and practice of school leadership, generating huge economic rewards for publishers, consultants, providers of professional development, and, not least, for university graduate programs. I have watched this development with growing alarm, because, from the classroom level, I see very little, if any, impact in most of the schools I visit that the industry has had much impact on leadership practice. To be sure, the leadership industry—and its collaborators in the “reform” industry—has changed the language that we use to describe leadership practice in the education sector. Reformers have always been good at changing rhetoric. But the absence of a strong clinical component, focused on professional practice, in the education sector has meant the gap between rhetoric and practice is wide and seemingly unbridgeable.

The value of this book is that it steps courageously, but modestly, into this gap between theory and practice. It could only have been written by an exemplary, but self-effacing, practitioner of leadership. While it purports to focus on the novice school leader as its target audience, in my experience, it will be equally useful to people in the field who think they already know how to lead. The vision of leadership here is an ambitious one that stands apart from the practices I see in the vast majority of American schools I visit. “Instructional leadership” has become the dominant motif in graduate programs and professional development for school leaders, but, as with most ambitious reforms in the last century of American education, this theme is evident more in the language of professional reformers than it is in the practice of leaders.

The problem Sarah sets for the field is how to reconcile “the vastness of the job’s landscape” with the fundamental imperative that the only real value leaders add to the organizations they lead is their ability to enable the improvement of instructional practice and student learning. A wise colleague of mine, Gabriel Camara, who has transformed learning in some nine thousand schools in Mexico, with the simplest of learning theories, has observed that educators invest enormous time and energy into “trying to make the crooked and complex into the straight and simple,”

while it is much more promising to start with the straight and simple and use it to displace the crooked and complex.

In their simplest form, the fundamentals of leadership practice that Sarah develops in this book are “learning” and “improvement.” “Learning is learning,” she argues, whether applied to adults or students; the fundamental task of leaders is to enable learning, full stop. Learning, she argues, in many different contexts, is a fundamentally developmental practice. Human beings *learn their way into* new understandings of the world they live and work in and into new practices for managing their own learning and the learning of others. Leadership practice and the organizations in which leaders operate succeed to the degree that they engage their members and clients in a continuous process of facing the uncertainty of *not* knowing the solution to the problems they face and, individually and collectively, discovering how to learn what they don’t know. This perspective on leadership is refreshingly presented in rich, practical terms through the many lenses of the work that school leaders are expected to do. The tasks are complex; the underlying theory of the work is simple and direct.

Among the many useful themes Sarah explores, there are three that I think she sheds particularly powerful light upon. First, leadership-as-learning requires the capability to listen, empathize, and reflect back, even when what you are hearing and seeing threatens your identity as a leader. This view is a refreshing antidote to the prevailing view in some parts of the education sector that the work of leadership requires decisive use of command-and-control. Second, leadership-as-learning requires the cultivation of trust, which in turn requires the cultivation of predictable and safe learning environments in which it is permissible to make—and correct—mistakes. And third, while it may be true that leadership is often lonely work, leaders-as-learners have a responsibility to take care of themselves in order to provide the support they must give to others. Sarah had the guidance of a gifted and wise coach, whose job was to observe and counsel in much the same way she worked with teachers.

In the next decade or so, educators will have to decide how to construct careers in an environment in which the social activity called “learning”

will no longer be under the monopoly control of the nineteenth century artifact called “school.” A good place to start preparing for this future is to think deeply about what learning is and how it works in organized settings. This book helps us begin that conversation.

—Richard F. Elmore

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