

# The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations

A review of Kearns, T. (2011) *The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations*, Leading Student Achievement Series (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin/Ontario Principals' Council), ISBN: 9781412981156.

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What capacity do we need as leaders to demonstrate authenticity and build credibility and trust? One of the most critical is our ability and willingness to engage in challenging, difficult, sensitive – in a word, courageous – conversations. ...Open, authentic, truthful dialogue, in an atmosphere of trust and respect, are the key ingredients that make meaningful change possible (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

The opening quote in the preface of *The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations* serves as a timely reminder of something really important in these times of accountability in education systems worldwide. There is much pressure to provide results that demonstrate school improvement through standardised testing and in short, often unachievable, timeframes – all at the expense of understanding the purpose and function of ‘meaningful change’ as a process of school improvement. Building capacity for sustained school improvement takes time, demands a shared approach to a way of working, and the development of a professional learning community. Tim Kearns, the author of this book and a consultant for Education Leadership Canada, makes no claim that this book will lead to sustained school improvement, but instead explains that it provides a set of skills to ‘develop and manage effective relationships that will support ongoing school improvement initiatives’ and by improving the ability of leaders to facilitate challenging conversations, provides skills that will ‘increase the school leader’s confidence and competence in the face of challenge’ (Kearns, 2011, p. ix).

*The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations* is one of six handbooks in the *Leading Student Achievement* series. This series is a joint publication by the Ontario Principals’ Council and Corwin Press. Designed to support and develop excellent school leadership, the handbooks were originally developed as one-day workshops where the authors shared their expertise in key areas of school leadership. It is a hands-on and practical handbook providing support and a win-win orientation for school leaders dealing with challenging conversations.

While school leadership may be used to describe leadership at all levels of an organisation – the ‘school leader’, as defined in this book, includes principals, vice and assistant principals, teacher leaders, and community leaders within the school community. In this sense, the book title

may be deceiving, defining the ‘principal as leader’ of challenging conversations and may limit the possible broader audience as indicated within the book.

School principals and other aspiring leaders are busy people. As I flicked through the contents pages, I was looking for something that I thought would tempt them to take time to read this. What sets this book apart from any other resources I have seen on challenging conversations and active listening? And then, a simple phrase in the preface caught my eye: ‘Our work, our relationships and our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time’ (Scott, 2004). This reference to *Fierce Conversations*, a book I was reading at the time, resonated with me, capturing my interest. But, what would the ‘hook’ be for principals and other leaders? I read on...

This handbook is 141 pages long and divided into eight short chapters. Chapters one and two consider the dimensions of challenging conversations, while chapters three to seven provide a framework for skills needed to effectively respond to challenges – active listening, assertive communication, provision of effective feedback, and anger management. The eighth and final chapter looks at the school leader as mediator, or facilitator of conversations, ending with the final section of the book which includes resources for personal reflection and application to the reader’s context. Each chapter provides an opportunity for reflection with sample questions for discussion, an opportunity to apply the knowledge to a brief case study, and a space for reflection on the reader’s own context – a personal case study.

Throughout the book, references to well-known authors are used to frame particular topics. For example, Kearns opens Chapter 3 *Listening for Meaning*, with a quotation from Stephen Covey’s (2004) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* – ‘Seek first to understand, then be understood’. Kearns balances the affirming aspects of conversation, as in Covey’s example, with the times when things are downright tough. He helps the reader distinguish between different strategies and the factors that affect strategy choice. For example, there may be times when avoidance of a difficult conversation is the best tactic when emotions are running high, while at other times, confrontation without regard for ongoing relationships might be needed – where safety and security are at risk, as ‘school leaders are also responsible for ensuring that the “moral purpose” of education is fulfilled’ (Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006, cited in Kearns, 2011, p. 97).

The leaders’ ability to manage ‘challenging conversations’ is a core component of developing leadership capacity and sustained school improvement. Schools need to be able to ‘talk well’ and ‘listen even better’ (p. 2). Where there is a ‘high degree of relational trust’ (Stephenson, 2009, cited in Kearns, 2011, p. 104), the leader as facilitator of a conversation can maintain a degree of neutrality to effectively facilitate the conversation. ‘Neutrality is best preserved by a school leader who demonstrates significant interpersonal skills in managing a conversation and who works within frameworks and processes that are transparent’ (p. 104). As quoted in one case study example: ‘We build trust and authentic relationships as much by what we do as by what we say. In a nutshell – Process counts!’ (p. 11).

So, back to my original question, what makes this book different? What would be the ‘hook’ for principals and other aspiring school leaders? Sustained school improvement is a long term and complex process. Recognising this, Kearns highlights the importance of developing and managing effective relationships that support ongoing school improvement initiatives. Each chapter highlights a real life case study, illustrating the concepts and skills under discussion and ends with a case study for collegial discussion. These perhaps provide that ‘hook’ for school leaders.

Through the case study materials and reflective techniques, the book provides a guide to ‘how’ to apply the techniques for managing effective communications in the establishment of a professional learning community.

*The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations* does not guarantee sustained school improvement, but it is designed to promote personal reflection, assist in building trusting relationships in a collaborative school community, and to develop skills in meeting the challenges of everyday life as a core component for sustaining school improvement. Broadly speaking, it’s a very useful blend of theory and practice and a good resource not just for principals, but leaders at all levels of an organisation, including teacher and community leaders.

## Reference

SCOTT, S. (2004) *Fierce Conversations: Achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time* (New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group).