I have about thirty seconds to persuade you that this book is different from the other thousands of books on the subject of leadership, but neither idol worship nor “ten easy steps” can make the critical connection between leadership and impact. What distinguishes this book is connections—the links between what leaders aspire to do and their actual accomplishments. It is not enough for leaders merely to be, as leadership descriptions suggest, and it is not enough for leaders merely to do. Rather, there are essential elements of leadership that represent a combination of who leaders are, what they do, and how they respond to the challenges before them.

The good news is that effective leadership is possible. It isn’t the result of an innate set of mystical powers; it is, instead, a result of learning. The bad news is that effective leadership is rare. Mann and Harter of the Gallup Organization (2016) report that the vast majority of people regard their leaders as disengaged, uninformed, uncaring, and incompetent, and only 13 percent of employees worldwide report being fully engaged at work. Most employees would forgo a substantial raise to see their immediate supervisor sent to the gallows . . . or at least exiled from their workplace.

*From Leading to Succeeding* provides seven elements of leadership that, supported by an international body of evidence, are linked to better performance. But performance is not the typical litany of results, whether measured in quarterly earnings for business leaders or test scores for education leaders. *Leadership* in this context is about the elements that inextricably link leadership to impact.

The inspiration for the structure of this book is the classic text *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. First published in 1918, the book continues to be a reference for writers, from 21st century bloggers to their ink-stained predecessors. The term *element* is an interesting one, with definitions ranging from the casual,
merely a component of the larger body under observation, to the chemical, the basic building blocks of the universe. Human knowledge has progressed a good deal since Aristotle suggested that the world consisted of four basic elements—fire, water, air, and earth.

Similarly, the ancients wrote about leadership, and there remains a good deal to learn by studying older texts, including the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Christian Gospels, the Magna Carta, the Napoleonic Code, and the Declaration of Independence, to name just a few. While the intervening centuries have taught us a few things about leadership, some thinkers in each era have the conceit that they are the final arbiters of truth.

I make no such pretense. In this respect, I do not take as my model the soaring rhetoric of Gandhi, Churchill, or Franklin D. Roosevelt, but rather their rough drafts. For example, the best part of a tour of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York, is not the newspaper headlines, the radio fireside chats, or the pictures showing the United States in recovery from the Great Depression and World War II. For me, it is the seldom noticed and underappreciated rough drafts of FDR’s most famous speeches, the margins of which contain Roosevelt’s handwritten amendments. Only later drafts of the first inaugural address of 1933 contain the phrase “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and the same is true of the phrase in his address to a shaken United States eight years later, “A date which will live in infamy.”

These phrases, and many others like them, were not the product of an orator or writer who was singularly inspired, but rather of a team that moved and inspired the world. This is an apt metaphor for leadership. It is not the inspired word or exceptional action of a single charismatic person but the work of many, with credit often bestowed on the few. If this book has any value to the leaders who choose to read it, let it be as a reminder to check their egos at the door and remember the many who helped them to achieve their present measure of success.

The seven elements of leadership presented in this book include purpose, trust, focus, leverage, feedback, change, and sustainability. However, agreement with these elements is not essential to provoke important dialogue with colleagues about the nature and purpose of leadership. The book is designed for consumption in bite-sized chunks. For example, each chapter might serve as grist for study and discussion in a leadership meeting or part of a larger discussion within your professional learning community (PLC).
The Elements of Leadership

I present the seven elements of leadership in a deliberate order. Without purpose and trust, the most brilliant execution is without a firm foundation. Without sustainability, the most ardent and well-intentioned leadership efforts will evaporate like the summer’s dew. The elements are not a checklist of items to be completed, checked off, and forgotten. Sustainability governs decisions. If a suggestion is not consistent with the stated purpose of an organization, it is abandoned or revised. If an outcome will not or cannot last, we don’t invest our time, energy, and resources.

The journey from leading to succeeding requires deliberation. We must allocate time and attention to actions that have the greatest impact on results and fulfill our purpose—now and in the future. If your idea of success is limited to quarterly earnings or annual test scores, then a different leadership book is more likely to meet your needs. If your idea of success is measured in lives changed long after your leadership tasks are completed, then I invite you to continue on this journey.

Purpose

The first element of leadership is purpose. When leaders have a guiding purpose, members of the organization can sometimes forgive them for errors in execution. But without clarity of purpose, cynicism becomes the reigning emotion throughout the entire organization. The enduring success of Scott Adams’s Dilbert, the cartoon that embodies organizational cynicism, is a testament to the prevalence of what one of the strip’s characters famously calls “process pride” (1997). Popular initiatives (strategic planning and standards implementation, for example) often seem to favor elevation of process over purpose.

Before you convene your next meeting, make your next phone call, or write another task on your endless to-do list, ask the fundamental question, What is our purpose? In order to create a purpose-driven organization, leaders must also have deep and abiding passion for that purpose. Passion is what sustains leaders and followers. Passion demonstrates why the purpose is worthwhile and prevents leaders from compromising on the essentials of purpose. Leaders with passion behind their purpose can follow the advice of 17th century theologian Rupertus Meldenius, who wrote (originally in Latin and translated), “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity” (Cherok, 2015). Leaders with purpose know the essentials and convey them clearly and consistently throughout the organization without becoming dictators.
Trust

The second element of leadership is trust. According to the American Psychological Association (2014), more than 50 percent of employees distrust their employers, and the level of disengagement among teachers, in particular, is at an all-time high (Riggs, 2013). How did this happen? I’ve worked with many educational leaders, and I don’t know of a single one who aspired to be untrustworthy. Yet an astoundingly high number of them fall victim to the gap between rhetoric and reality. Their speeches at the beginning of the school year about how much they value teachers are quickly eclipsed by the absence of collaboration. Their promises of parental involvement are overshadowed by hierarchical decision making that leaves out a parental perspective. They contradict their commitment to mission and vision with bureaucratic processes that undermine their values. Trust is not about what leaders say but rather what they do.

Focus

The third element of leadership is focus. Research on more than two thousand school plans reveals that schools with six or fewer priorities experience significantly higher gains in student achievement than the typical school with dozens of strategic priorities (Reeves, 2011). Fragmentation is even worse at the district level, where initiatives become an accumulation of the suggestions of every board member, political leader, grant provider, and teacher leader.

Considered individually, each suggestion has splendid potential. But piled on top of one another, these initiatives divert the energy, time, and money of the entire system. For example, professional learning communities (PLCs) are one of the most important and influential initiatives of the past three decades. Yet I have witnessed school leaders claim that “we are doing PLCs,” only to discover that they simply changed the name of their faculty meeting (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Rather than the collaborative insights that lie at the heart of PLCs, the frantic, fragmented, and administrator-focused meetings continued as if no one had rearranged the chairs in the faculty meeting for the past fifty years.

Leverage

How does one decide where to focus? The fourth element of leadership is leverage, a systematic inquiry into the specific leadership actions associated with the greatest improvements in student results and organizational effectiveness. John

Going by the very low bar of statistical significance, just about anything works—that is, most interventions have a nonrandom relationship to student results. There is a significant research bias in favor of establishing significant relationships. However, scholars can better serve the world of education by honestly writing, “While this initiative might show statistically significant results, it has no practical significance. Time and energy devoted to this initiative would be better diverted to other, more useful efforts.”

For example, researchers have established that one of the highest-leverage strategies in education is nonfiction writing (Reeves, 2006a). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) encourage a significant increase in argumentative writing. This policy prescription is excellent but holds little value if teachers and administrators give it equal weight with everything else in the Common Core. Similarly, effective and accurate feedback has a disproportionate impact on student results. Teachers and administrators following the principle of leverage would therefore devote far more time to nonfiction writing and effective feedback than to other initiatives with less impact. Being statistically significant is not enough. Leverage requires school leaders to systematically analyze the return on investment of the time and resources teachers and education systems expend.

**Feedback**

The fifth element of leadership is feedback. In no other area is there a greater divergence between evidence and practice. We know what effective feedback looks like—just watch a great music teacher or excellent athletic coach. Every student receives immediate and specific feedback, and the most casual observer can draw a relationship from the feedback to improve performance. But in many classrooms, feedback has been reduced to telling students only if they are right or wrong, without specifics. If the music teacher shouts “Wrong note!” without explaining whether to sing higher or lower, louder or softer, or slower or faster, he or she can hardly expect improvement. Effective feedback depends on specificity.

We evaluate teachers with incomprehensible statistical models and encyclopedic checklists. We evaluate students with assessments that are only distantly linked to daily classroom practice and with grading policies that are inaccurate and unfair. We evaluate leaders at the end of their contracts, long after any coaching might
have improved their performance. Leaders who get everything else right but get feedback wrong run into a wall of demoralized opposition.

**Change**

How can leaders improve trust, focus, leverage, and feedback? They must master the art of leading change, the sixth element of leadership. Change requires leaders to acknowledge that present practices are not working. While many leaders confess their need to change, it is still exceptionally difficult for them to directly answer the questions, What will you change? What is something that you control, over which you have personal influence, that you can do differently today?

Change leadership involves a challenging paradox. While governing boards hire leaders expecting the candidates to be agents of change, they quickly become disenchanted when the leaders do precisely that—engage in difficult but necessary change initiatives. One superintendent I admire very much, a close friend, has repeated this cycle five times: enter as the hero, achieve great results, and exit as the unpopular villain. Change leadership is not popular or a key to career security; it is essential.

**Sustainability**

The seventh and final element of leadership is sustainability. The best leaders are known not only for what they achieve during their tenure, but also for what endures long after they leave. Julius Caesar showed us that leadership transitions are tricky. As Shakespeare’s rendition of Antony’s funeral oration put it: “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones” (Shakespeare, 3.2.75–76). Despite receiving one of the best funeral orations in the English language, Caesar’s vision for Roman glory, and a history of successful conquests, the empire quickly descended into chaos.

Most leadership transitions in education are not quite as dramatic, but they certainly can be brutal, public, and destructive. Once an education system acquires the reputation of destroying its most recent leader, it becomes very difficult for that system to entice the best talent to join the leadership team. When the operating assumption of the new leader is that the ideas, values, and loyalties associated with the prior regime were unforgivably wrong, then today’s Caesar quickly becomes tomorrow’s Brutus, with the crowd changing its affections within moments.

Am I being overly dramatic? With the average tenure of urban superintendents a little more than three years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014), it is easy
for veteran teachers and administrators to become somewhat cynical. The same
is true at the building level where principal turnover is rampant. Some of the
lucrative Race to the Top grants for schools in need of improvement actually
demanded replacement of the principal. The ethic of firing the “bad” principals
(a judgment based on their students’ low test scores) and replacing them with
“good” ones (a judgment based on their students’ high test scores) is not bur-
dened with any evidentiary foundation (DuFour, 2015b).

One recent study estimates that the cost of principal turnover exceeds $75,000
per school (Childress, 2014). Thus the central challenge of leadership is not
merely change but sustainability. Leaders must concentrate their energy over the
course of many years on what matters most and what will continue to matter after
they have left their positions. Michael Fullan (2005) warns:

We need a radically new mind-set for reconciling the seem-
ingly intractable dilemmas fundamental for sustainable reform:
top-down versus bottom-up, local and central accountability,
informed prescription and informed professional judgment,
improvement that keeps being replenished. We need, in other
words, to tackle the problem of sustainability head-on. (p. 11)

The Truth About Leadership

Leadership consists of seven essential elements: purpose, trust, focus, leverage,
feedback, change, and sustainability. With these elements, leaders and those they
serve can meet any challenge. But miss even a single one of these essentials, and
the efforts of even the most earnest leaders are far less likely to be effective.

The following pages reflect not only the best 21st century research on leadership
but also classic literature in the field. While my own forty years of experience in
leadership positions certainly influence my writing, I have attempted to bolster
every conclusion not with my personal experiences but with contemporary evi-
dence. Although the book is designed for education leaders, we can draw lessons
from nonprofit, government, business, and community leaders. Similarly, leaders
in other domains have a great opportunity to learn from effective education lead-
ers. This book does not provide a simplistic recipe for success but rather a model
for reflection, self-assessment, and continuous improvement. I do not pretend to
offer the last word on the subject but, instead, provide a framework leaders can
use to synthesize their own experiences, past research, future experiences, and
new research.
This book provides a synthesis of the best research on leadership, not elevating one researcher over another, but instead seeking the intersection of many different research methods and perspectives. Thus, we will consider large-scale international databases, case studies, qualitative investigations, quantitative analyses, meta-analyses, and syntheses of meta-analyses.

When a variety of perspectives and methods come to the same conclusion, they approach the truth about leadership. It means learning from mistakes, not just telling war stories that demonstrate miraculously successful decisions. Therefore, this book offers a variety of perspectives from many research methods and a counterpoint to opinions and personal journeys that masquerade as evidence based.

In the ocean of ink spilled about leadership (at this writing, Amazon.com offers 119,361 titles on the subject), there is an evident zeal to proclaim new, exciting, and contemporary ideas on the subject. This book takes a contrary approach. The essential question is not What's new? but rather What endures? Although this book presents contemporary evidence on effective leadership, it is also important to consider the enduring evidence on leadership. For example, while technology, globalization, and intense political pressures have in some ways changed the demands placed on leaders, trust and credibility have remained constant over the years.

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner (2011) report that results from surveys administered to over one hundred thousand people from around world reveal the following.

- Credible leaders are at their best when they are passionate about what they are doing. (p. 173)
- Credible leaders share information. People can’t be expected to learn if they aren’t given opportunities to make mistakes. (p. 131)
- Shared values can only be sustained through reinforcements built into everyday organizational policies, systems, and programs. (p. 110)
- Credible leaders demonstrate their trustworthiness by acting in the best interests of others. (p. 83)
- DWWSWWD (Do what we say we will do) is what distinguishes leader credibility from personal credibility. Leaders represent their organizations, not just themselves. Leaders’ actions must be consistent with the shared values of their organizations. (p. 41)
Introduction

- Credibility is earned by daily actions leaders take over time. It does not come automatically with the job or the title. (p. 21)

Although credibility is important for a leader, it is an insufficient quality for leadership. Effective leaders require a combination of skills and characteristics that I am calling the *elements of leadership*. It is likely that readers will want to add to the list of seven elements based on their personal experiences and investigations. I welcome such engagement and creativity. However, it is unlikely that any part of this list of seven elements can be eliminated. I have seen many leaders who excel in many respects, but their enthusiasm for every passing opportunity, for example, causes them to lose focus (see chapter 3, page XX). The revolving door of senior leaders suggests that many of these exceptionally qualified professionals offer extraordinary purpose and passion for their education systems, but their ideas lack the sustainability (see chapter 7, page XX) to endure. Add to the elements of leadership as you wish, but omit them at your peril.

The Problem With Best Practices

Although much of the leadership literature focuses on best practices, this approach harbors an inherent deficiency. Stories about best practices are selective, presuming a causal relationship between a leadership practice and exceptional results. They possess a seductive appeal, as leaders apply one best practice, and then another, and then another. Soon, their fragmented efforts undermine promising initiatives and squander the time, attention, and resources of other leaders and organizations. Therefore, we should also consider worst practices.

The world does not need another book telling leaders what to do. What it needs is clear and specific guidance on how to tell the difference between best and worst practices. Even the best practices can become worst practices if leaders implement them inadequately, or they do not relate to improvements in student achievement. Therefore, for each of the seven elements of leadership, I will consider its polar opposite and, along the way, challenge some of the prevailing myths of leadership. It is meaningless to talk about focus without addressing fragmentation. Bromides about trust are of little help without understanding the causes of mistrust. To put a fine point on it, best practices aren’t all they are cracked up to be unless we are candid about worst practices.

The other challenge with best practices is the *post hoc* fallacy—that is, presuming that since one event precedes another, the first must have caused the second. By such logic, Napoleon’s early victories led him to the disastrous march
to Moscow and, inevitably, to Waterloo. The 20th century fascination with measuring industrial processes led to an industry based on high-stakes standardized testing in the 21st century.

Twenty-first century educational Taylorists assume a direct correlation between a reduction in the time required for test preparation (the “raw materials” of student achievement) and test scores (the “finished product” of contemporary accountability measures). This follows Frederick Taylor’s 1800s-era belief that there was a direct correlation between reducing the time a laborer hauled raw materials to the assembly line and industrial efficiency. He thought it could be measured in finished products.

This pattern of decisions, incredibly, continues even after researchers have proven it counterproductive (Darling-Hammond, 2015; DuFour, 2015a). In the years ahead, we must be mindful of the dangers of seeing today’s challenges through the lens of yesterday’s best practices.

Finally, I would like to share a word about hope for leaders and those aspiring to become leaders. There is no formula to protect you from frustration, exhaustion, and occasional fits of despair. These are part of the burden of leadership in any situation, particularly for contemporary education leaders. The antidote is not wishful thinking about changes in public attitudes and national policy—these move slowly, and leaders must answer in the present. The antidote is hope. Hendrie Weisinger and J. P. Pawliw-Fry (2015) report:

Adults and children who score higher in hope (1) score higher satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, meaning in life, and happiness; (2) cope better with injuries, diseases, and physical pain; (3) excel in academics from elementary to graduate school; and (4) perform better in sports. What is especially compelling about the last two findings is that they occurred at levels well beyond what the researchers would have predicted based on natural abilities. In other words, hope predicted academic performance better than intelligence, and athletic performance more accurately than natural ability. (p. 236)

This book offers seven elements of effective leadership. Consider reflecting on one element each day of the week, ending your week with a reflection on sustainability. What will endure after you are gone? Stephen Covey (1989) suggests that we write our own eulogies. That’s good advice. What endures? I doubt you want someone to utter at your memorial service, “She completed more than 80 percent of the goals of her strategic plan!” The purposes that guide our lives
should influence not only our own actions but also the generations to come. Each of the following chapters explores an element of leadership in detail and invites you to have a conversation about what matters most for a leader—you—and an organization. You will finish this book with a sharper focus, greater clarity, and the means to sustain your ideals.