Moral Purpose Is Not a Strategy

Waiting for "Superman" (www.waitingforsuperman
.com) is a powerful film directed by Davis Guggenheim
(2010) and produced by Lesley Chilcott, of *An Inconvenient
Truth* fame. Among other things, it shows specific promises
from every president since Lyndon Johnson about education
being the central priority, whether it be the Elementary and
Secondary Education Act of 1965, or Goals 2000 in 1989, or No
Child Left Behind of 2001, or Race to the Top in 2010.

Each president fervently commits himself and the govern-
ment to addressing the crisis of education. Fast-forward to
2011. The United States has slipped from first in the world in
high school graduation and university participation to about
24th. It has tripled its per-pupil expenditures in constant dol-
lars to become the biggest spender on education in the world.
And the life chances of the poor have become deeply mired in

the muck of failed reform after failed reform. In most large urban cities with race and poverty tag-teaming to hold people down, children and youth know more people personally who are in jail than who are in postsecondary education. Prison enrollment, so to speak, has exploded at a cost of $35,000 per inmate, while school enrolment limps along at $10,000 per pupil, itself the highest in the world.

Waiting for "Superman" is a disturbing portrayal, even at the macro level. But it gets gut-wrenching when it follows the fortunes of five poor kids—Anthony and Bianca (black), Daisy and Francisco (mixed), and Emily (white)—as their parents (mostly single moms) struggle to get their children in charter schools with strong quality reputations. These schools admit children using a lottery system with anywhere from a 1-in-5 to a 1-in-20 chance of being selected. Only Emily gets selected, and Anthony is admitted later from a waiting list. The personal heartbreak is horrible. The system that forces kids and their parents to struggle through the agony (for the large majority) of hopes rising and being dashed is wicked. That hope would be reduced to providing escape routes for a few children is morally reprehensible and socially irresponsible. That is the message of the film's producers as well. Unfortunately, they fall short on furnishing even a directional solution.

Waiting for "Superman" captures the moral imperative writ large, and writ deep. But in my view, this is not the moral *imperative* if only a handful of disadvantaged kids get a chance. The first two-thirds of the film is as brilliant as it is alarming. Unfortunately, the last third relies on moral outrage as its sole strategy and fails to identify any way out other than to say we need more schools with passionate leaders and teachers. Of course we do. But moral purpose, even deeply felt, by itself is not a strategy. We need moral purpose actualized, and on a very large scale. The latter is the essence of this book.

MORAL IMPERATIVE AS STRATEGY

So the question is not just how deep is your moral imperative, but equally, what is your strategy to enact it. Just as moral imperative is not a strategy, neither is being "right." We will see the strategies in detail, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, but let's establish some basics here for making the moral imperative a strategy (see Exhibit 1.1).

Exhibit 1.1   Moral Imperative as Strategy

1. Make a personal commitment
2. Build relationships
3. Focus on implementation
4. Develop the collaborative
5. Connect to the outside
6. Be relentless (and divert distracters)

Make a Personal Commitment

Although, as we shall see, not every principal needs to be a martyr, not a bad place to start is George Bernard Shaw:

> I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

A bit overstated for our purpose, but it gets us in the mood. School leadership is serious business. It takes a combination of clear personal values, persistence against a lot of

odds, emotional intelligence, thick skin, and resilience. It also takes a knack for focusing on the right things and for problem solving. We will see plenty of named cases of this in action, but let us realize that the best leaders have strong values and are skilled at strategy. Attila the Hun and Hitler meet this definition. Leaders with moral purpose, on the other hand, have a different content—deep commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap for all students.
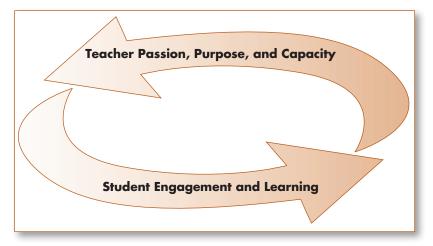
Leaders need to support, activate, extract, and galvanize the moral commitment that is in the vast majority of teachers. Most teachers want to make a difference, and they especially like leaders who help them and their colleagues achieve success in terrible circumstances. Revealingly, once this process is under way, teachers as a group value leaders who help the hardcore resistant teachers leave. When this happens, the cohesion of the rest of the staff actually *increases* (Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Linton, 2011).

At the individual teacher level, the equation is depicted in Exhibit 1.2.

Yes, the passion, purpose, and capacity of teachers in the service of students is the key, but how does one enact these qualities if they are weak or missing? How does one realize them on a very large scale? The school leaders' new niche is exactly this work. You can't get blood out of a stone, but the leaders you will encounter in this book do get blood out of things that look like stones. Moral imperative realized is the bottom line.

There is a pretty hefty tome, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists,* by Susan Neiman (2009), that I would not recommend that you read from cover to cover, but there is one key message that comes through loud and clear: Don't expect to find moral purpose somewhere other than in yourself. However much you are inspired by other people's examples or by the written word, "you are responsible for thinking it

Exhibit 1.2	Teacher Passion, Purpose, and Capacity Equated to Student Engagement and Learning

Teacher Passion, Purpose, and Capacity

Student Engagement and Learning

Source: Adapted from Fullan, 2003.

through on your own" (p. 18). And this is not a one-time proposition: "Moral judgment is not a matter of decisions made once and for all, but of keeping your eye on distinctions" (p. 3).

Clarity of purpose is a crucial foundation, but how you get there is craft. As Neiman (2009) puts it, "creating moral order in the world is just what we're meant to give back to it. If there is going to be reason in the world, it is we who have to put it there" (p. 429). In other words, we are on our own (but as we shall see, we can get plenty of help from others).

Finally, I should say that personal commitment must be accompanied by optimism that progress can be made even in the most troubled situations. Without that we are done before we start. Take Neiman's (2009) wisdom on the matter: "Nothing promotes inertia like cynicism" (p. 77). Or, more fully: "Cynicism punctures the energy that leads you to try. It suggests that you know it all, so your action is always *Yeah?*

So, what else is new? Once you start saying that you'll allow anything to happen" (p. 401, italics in original).

School leaders, then, must come to have what I call *informed optimism* (we solved the last problem, so we can figure out this one). But more than that, they must build relationships with the skeptics and the cynics.

Build Relationships

I once observed, only half-facetiously, that emotional intelligence is building a relationship with someone you don't like, and who doesn't like you. In *The Change Leader* (Fullan, in press), I have a few "killer slides" (insights that are especially powerful). The one that fits here is "All effective leaders combine resolute moral purpose with impressive empathy." We already know about resolute moral purpose—the necessary but not sufficient drive to keep going even when things are not working. But to get anywhere you have to build relationships with many different people—people who disagree with you, the skeptical and cynical. If you are to have any chance of progressing, you have to have enough empathy for their situation so that you can relate to them. It is impressive because they are slowing you down, so to speak. It is impressive because you understand their perspective even if it is not yours.

In some toxic situations, you need to get rid of some people, but normally you will need to build relationships with diverse people. In motion leadership, we pay a lot of attention to sequence. The rule of thumb here is that if you want to challenge someone to do better, you'd better build a relationship first. So all this talk about relationships being crucial is correct. But you have to realize it as part and parcel of the moral imperative in action.

This is very specific work. Take Yarrow's (2009) recent survey of the state of mind of teachers in the United States. He

found that 40% are *disheartened*, 23% *idealists*, and 37% *contented*. We can quibble with the purity of the labels (some of the disheartened are surely cynical), but we can see immediately that the principal must relate to all three groups. For the disheartened, the principal will need to help them realize moral purpose, thereby stirring their motivation to get engaged (see Chapter 2). For the idealists, it may be a matter of appreciating them and helping them work with others who are not so motivated. The contented will need to be galvanized into action. Incidentally, one of the most important working conditions that teachers always cite is having a good principal.

As leaders, then, we can't depend on encountering teachers or parents or students who are already optimistic that success is possible. Some teachers need to go, but the majority in difficult circumstances will have to be convinced through new experiences that progress is possible. Indeed, leaders have to help people taste success that they never have experienced before.

We will see specific, even dramatic examples in subsequent chapters, but let me portray the mindset of the moral imperative. Some of these words will sound odd, but here is the essence:

1. Leaders facing terrible situations will have to lead with respect. Put differently, they will have to convey respect *before people have earned it.*

2. Leaders need to do everything possible to create conditions that make people lovable (mainly by creating circumstances that favor success).

3. And then leaders must deal firmly with what's left over.

It is not as simple as *1, 2, 3,* but realized moral purpose is just what it says. You actually accomplish results. Nothing else counts. And when you do get somewhere, the energy that

is released enables the group to go places they never thought possible. Once they experience that, they will never go back.

Focus on Implementation

In all of our work at the school, district, and state levels, there is one factor that stands out time and again when it comes to success—and the word is *focus.* Doug Reeves (in press) has written a book about it, *Finding Your Leadership Focus.* He shows that most leaders fall victim to the "law of initiative fatigue." Too many ad hoc piecemeal initiatives descend on school leaders, and some leaders add insult to injury by voluntarily pursuing too many projects and innovations. Instead, argues Reeves, leaders must concentrate on a cluster of three essential practices: focus, monitoring in relation to the focus, and displaying a strong sense of efficacy. A sense of efficacy is not so much advance confidence that you can succeed but rather that you can make things work, that what you have to do is within your control. Efficacy is very close to realized purpose because it stems from your experience that you can be successful. It may be a huge struggle, but you, working with others, will get there.

The focus I am talking about must be on instructional practice. In Ontario, we have had widespread success in substantially improving literacy and numeracy in over 5,000 schools by focusing on these priorities and by going deep in assessment and improvement of teaching and learning geared to the individual needs of the students teachers have before them (Fullan, 2010a). The moral imperative needs to be channeled into the improvement of practice. You see it time and again in the works of Reeves, Elmore, DuFour, and many others. The moral imperative, deep focus, constructive monitoring, and corresponding efficacious action are an unstoppable combination.

Develop the Collaborative

Effective leaders with moral purpose don't do it alone. And they don't do it by hiring and supporting "individuals." Instead, they develop and employ the collaborative. Time and again we see the power of collective capacity. When the group is mobilized with focus and specificity, it can accomplish amazing results (what we call in motion leadership *the speed of quality implementation*). The collaborative, sometimes known as professional learning communities, gets these results because not only are leaders being influential, but peers are supporting and pressuring each other to do better.

This collective capacity is the sine qua non of whole-system reform. It gets built up within the school, but also is fostered as schools learn from each other. Focused groups large and small are unequivocally more productive. The moral imperative is a distinctively social enterprise.

Connect to the Outside

The power of the collaborative is seen not only within schools but also in networks, clusters, or other means of deliberately using well-led peer learning strategies. Again, we will see specific examples later. Connecting to the outside is essential for the moral imperative to have sufficient infrastructure. In fact, a principal's moral imperative is stunted if it is only applied internally to that specific school (see Chapter 3).

Of course, the outside is big and we will have to differentiate. The outside will include other schools in your district, parents and community, the district itself, and the larger state and national context. The moral imperative is systemic.

Be Relentless (and Divert Distracters)

Maggie Jackson (2009), in *Distracted*, shows in frightening detail how our ability to focus is being systematically eroded

by the frenetic pace of modern life, with its myriad technology and related fragmented bits and bytes. She says, "We are less and less able to see, hear, and comprehend what's relevant and permanent . . . so many of us feel that we can barely keep our head above water, and our days are marked by perpetual loose ends" (p. 14). Sounds like the job description of the 21st-century school principal!

Jackson (2009) recommends that we cultivate a renaissance of focus, judgment, and awareness. Paying attention on a sustained basis to what is and might be important is extremely difficult under today's conditions, and there can be no better example than the current principalship. I will show specific named examples to demonstrate that effective principals cultivate their resolute moral purpose, and they do so by being exquisitely aware of the distractions and diversions on the way. They work both sides of the coin simultaneously—they stay the course on key priorities, and they proactively blunt or divert what might get in the way.

Interestingly, not all the distracters are bureaucratic or imposed. As indicated earlier by Doug Reeves, ad hoc innovations and initiatives—each of which makes sense in its own independent way—can be just as diluting. Thus we need to think of focus and coherence together—coherent focus, relentlessly pursued—while paying attention to data, especially that which is related to individual student progress and to the motivation of adults who can do something to further achievement.

MORAL PURPOSE IS NOT SUFFICIENT

I have said that there is more to moral purpose than moral purpose. The moral imperative to be realized must combine deep commitment and the means of enacting it. Thus *commitment plus strategy* are required. If either commitment or strategy is weak, the result is failure.

Let's consider some examples from Bryk and Schneider's (2002) work in Chicago. Their Ridgeway Elementary School is a good case in point. The principal, Dr. Newman, articulates a strong philosophy of "students as his first priority" and staff as a close second. The authors elaborate:

> Dr. Newman knew that he needed to establish trusting relationships with all members of his school community to advance its improvement efforts. He was articulate about what this meant to him. "Trust is built by contact, by consistency, by doing what you say you're going to do, by showing concern, by acting on solutions, [but] mostly by doing what you say you're going to do." Throughout our interviews, Dr. Newman talked at length about the importance of positive social relations in the functioning of a good school, and felt strongly that developing trust was critical within his school community. (pp. 38–39)

Despite this attractive philosophy, Dr. Newman, in practice, attempted to be conciliatory with individuals and groups. Far from Collins's (2001) "disciplined thought and action" in "confronting the brutal facts" (p. 13) with respect to performance, the principal pushed a little but backed off in the face of any opposition. Conflict avoidance in the face of poor performance is an act of moral neglect. Bryk and Schneider (2002) make a number of observations:

- Relational trust atrophies when individuals perceive that others are not acting in ways that are consistent with their understandings of the other's role obligations. (p. 51)
- Although the principal appeared to listen to everyone's concerns, he rarely followed up on them. (p. 51)

- The stronger teachers at Ridgeway limited their interactions with other staff who they regarded as behaving unprofessionally toward their students. (p. 51)
- Absent a base of collegial trust, a few individual teachers might attempt some innovations in their own classrooms, but larger initiatives that demanded coordinated effort would remain unsuccessful. (p. 52)
- Dr. Newman's seeming willingness to tolerate both incompetence and a lack of commitment within the faculty undermined his relational trust with parents, community leaders, and his own teachers. (p. 53)

Seems like a fairly straightforward case of lack of integrity and courage until you find out that many teachers didn't mind the laissez-faire approach—they preferred to be left alone. (The moral imperative is decidedly *not* leaving people alone; revealingly, people like autonomy when they experience bad bosses and poor peers [Fullan, in press].) When it came time to renew the principal's contract (a responsibility of the school's Local School Council [LSC] in Chicago's relatively decentralized system at the time), Bryk and Schneider (2002) report the following:

> Many teachers attended the LSC meeting. . . . One teacher . . . voiced strong support for Dr. Newman. She spoke of Ridgeway as a "professional environment" and described Dr. Newman as a "very visible principal" who is compassionate and "caring" [and that] "it would be a big loss to the community if Dr. Newman does not remain at Ridgeway." (p. 43)

Two months later the LSC voted, "with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm" (p. 43), to renew Dr. Newman's contract. Moral purpose on the surface is not the moral imperative.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) offer another example, this time a principal with an apparently stronger moral purpose,

but who also ended up accomplishing little. The principal at Thomas Elementary School in Chicago is Dr. Gonzalez. On arriving at the school, "he spoke passionately" about the ties between home and school:

> I would say that Chicago School Reform provides the opportunity for society to define a specific school that fits some kind of common values—a place that will be called the neighborhood school in which the values of the home and school are going to be similar. It is amazing to me how much discontinuity exists between the school values and the home values. Especially in the inner-city schools, you definitely find that there is a tremendous gap. For me, that is one of the basic reasons for school failure, the tremendous gap that exists between the school and parents. (p. 56)

Fundamental change was required at Thomas Elementary School. The principal attempted this by working with teachers as he fostered relations with the community. Again, on the surface it looked like a winning combination:

> Strong principal leadership was needed to bring this faculty together. Dr. Gonzalez came to Thomas School as reform began. He articulated a vision for Thomas as a responsive institution to its local community. He sought to strengthen the role of parents in the education of their own children and demonstrated his personal regard for them through his day-to-day efforts at the school and around the neighborhood. He also recognized the importance of building a professional community among his teachers, and dedicated resources for their professional development (which was relatively uncommon in the early 1990s in Chicago). In many ways, Dr. Gonzalez offered a very appealing vision for

> both teachers and parents at Thomas School. Nonetheless, reform never really came together at Thomas during our three years of fieldwork there. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, pp. 71–72)

As Dr. Gonzalez pushed forward with reform, which included bilingualism (given a largely Hispanic clientele) and literacy improvement, he was unable to reconcile the conflict accompanying the changes with the trust and support essential for staying the course. As tensions rose, he "responded by taking a low-key approach" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 72). Once again we see vision-driven change that sounds good but fails to go much below the surface.

There are countless other examples of failed moral purpose documented in the literature. But that is not the point of this book. I am much more interested in actual success and how to get there. We will see, in the next two chapters, many named examples of moral purpose realized in Canada and the United States. The good news, although it is not nearly widespread enough, is that some systems have figured out that it is essential to go from slogan to sleuthing, and from sleuthing to success.

One last point that will become evident in the next chapter: Effective principals with moral purpose are not successful because they got everyone onboard in advance. The secret to *how* is the realization that success is created by a process that builds capacity and ownership through cumulative learning and commitment (see Fullan, 2010b). Strangely enough, advance agreement about a new direction bears no necessary relationship to the quality of subsequent implementation. And advance disagreement is not fatal. The moral imperative can be rescued or, if you like, created by good leaders during the process of implementation.

Remember Killer Slide No. 1: Effective leaders combine resolute moral purpose with impressive empathy.

It's all about realization.