1

Introduction

We are what we continually do.

—Aristotle

It is 11:00 p.m., and as he drives home from a 15-hour work day at the office, the restful evening that Aaron Milner was hoping for with his family has eluded him once again. Aaron Milner is the superintendent of a large school district. As Aaron drives home from work, he is distracted by the impending events of the next day, knowing that what lies ahead is a daunting task; a dreaded decision that was inevitable and must be acted upon.

Aaron has wrestled and anguished over a decision to terminate the contract of a building principal, Roberta Zelling. Roberta has been a secondary school administrator in the district for 4 years and has entrenched herself as a powerful leader . . . one who is both loathed and loved depending on with whom one talks. She has been known to criticize Aaron publicly, make negative comments about other district administrators when talking with school board members, and make disparaging remarks about Aaron to her faculty and staff. During her employment tenure, Roberta has built effective, robust rapport with many school stakeholders; however, Aaron has had to have frequent meetings with Roberta and even tendered written reprimands noting her lack of tact, work ethic, inability to meet time lines, and questionable ethical practices in performing her job. Roberta has not responded to the constructive criticism appropriately. Instead of taking steps to improve, Roberta has endeavored to strengthen her position with others by undermining Aaron's authority in nearly every aspect of schooling. She has solidified herself as a powerful force within the culture of the school and district since her last unflattering

formal evaluation. Aaron laments the fact that he inherited this personnel problem from the previous superintendent, whom he replaced 10 months earlier.

As Aaron eases his car down the road home, he is once again reminded that it is "lonely at the top." His angst makes it hard to find a comfortable driving position, and he longs to be in the comfort of his home. It is December 10th, and a light snow is falling outside. As Aaron nears his home, he can see a young rabbit hop aimlessly across the soft white snow that has gently covered the ground. The streetlight illuminates the shadow more than the creature as the young rabbit disappears into the dark. Aaron looks beyond the nearness to see all the houses lining the pristine landscape of his suburban neighborhood . . . only hints of light from the homes can be seen. He wonders what stress-filled events will befall his neighbors on the beckoning new day. Surely no one will be faced with such a daunting decision as he must make! Aaron's becomes distracted from his driving as he looks inward, almost hypnotically, to once again rehearse his mentally scripted meeting with his building administrator. Will she fight the termination? Will she label him a misogynist? Will she counterattack with charges directed at him? Will she appeal to board members with unfounded stories? Will she invent harassment or discrimination scenarios that would ruin his career? What would his wife think if trumped-up stories were revealed publicly? How will this termination affect other district schools, school employees, the 1,200 students she serves, and other administrators? Aaron's neck stiffens as he looks beyond the car to refocus on his driving. At the same time, the light snow settles on his windshield, momentarily disrupting his thoughts. As he reaches his driveway, Aaron realizes the restful evening he had craved was now hopelessly lost. He quietly eases from his car, straightening and stretching his ailing lower back; a reminder of the operation he had endured just 3 months earlier. He now understands why the doctor said that most back pain could be traced to stress. His anxiety level rises as the thought crosses his mind that he will most likely not sleep tonight. He thinks maybe he could call his family doctor to prescribe sleeping pills. Turning toward the house, and with a deep breath, Aaron slips through the front door to salvage his evening with his family, still distracted by the looming questions that plague his mind.

This scene, or similar anxiety-ridden scenes, permeate the very soul of school leaders at some time in their leadership careers. The names of the leaders are different, the educational institutions they lead are different, and even the types of decision making are different, but the angst that exists with all tough decisions rarely lifts. Difficult decisions compel school leaders, regardless of level or responsibility, to find solutions to minimize the anguish that surrounds complex and

difficult decision making. Simply stated, the contemporary leader must act decisively and with conviction, knowing that every decision is made for the "right" reasons. A sound pedagogy of decision making helps to ensure that America's schools thrive. When educational institutions flourish, the people who comprise these institutions will flourish too. Often, the journey of ensuring institutional fulfillment can begin only after a leader's pedagogical shift.

As schools, families, governmental units, and other for-profit and not-for-profit institutions come of age in the new millennium, the struggle for school leaders to make good, productive decisions seems to have become clouded with ever-growing uncertainty and skepticism. In an era of high expectations for accountability and entitlement among school stakeholders, decisions can quickly backfire and blow up in the face of school leaders with profound adverse effects. At every juncture of decision making, it appears that school leaders are being criticized for their decisions by any one of a number of individuals or institutions, including their own employees. School leaders are also subject to media criticisms for decisions made that affect people, programs, and school facilities. These criticisms and the negative environment they create can overwhelm a leader, adversely affecting current and future decision making. Yielding to criticism and negative feedback can also create untenable situations that could cost a leader his or her position, creating professional and personal duress. Many good decisions can be overshadowed suddenly by one decision that adversely affects an individual or group of individuals. Enormous pressures are being placed on our nation's school leaders at the building and district level. These pressures are compounded when school leaders lack a sound decision-making pedagogy and attempt to be *all* things to *all* people.

Contemporary school leaders are expected to perform better than ever before, being held accountable for teaching and learning while constantly striving for improvement and serving as positive change agents. Additionally, these contemporary school leaders must foster a healthy and positive educational climate. It often seems impossible!

The challenges facing school leaders in a new millennium of decision making will require a well-articulated pedagogy—a transformational approach that allows for difficult decisions to be made. Many contemporary leaders already embrace a successful paradigm of thought—a transforming focus from what is good for the individual to one that reflects what is best for the common good. Simply stated, *transformational decision making* means thinking and acting in ways that reflect the common good as the leadership imperative, not the individual good.

Transformational decision making offers a sound, fundamental framework of pedagogy for all school leaders to effectively meet the challenges of contemporary thinking, acting, and decision making. It is an effective means of looking at complex institutions while giving leaders of these entities methods and strategies to tackle tough decisions with a clear conscience and thorough understanding. Conceptualizing this contemporary paradigm is to be at peace with decision making. Transformational decision making by the school leader will translate into healthy, successful, and effective institutions—the mission of transformational decision making.

In order to understand how school leaders often arrive at a confounding condition of anxiety-ridden thinking and decision making, past leadership practices must be examined, current priorities assessed, and a determination of future direction codified. In other words, can you clearly articulate your leadership and decision-making pedagogy? If not, take time to self-assess. The Resource contains a Decision Making Self-Assessment. Completing this assessment before reading further will give you an informed perspective with which to view the book's content. Self-honesty and a robust awareness of your own leadership and decision-making pedagogy are critical to effectiveness. Numerous educational leadership books have been published expounding on the virtues of great leadership, providing a framework with which to view leadership. Successful authors on the subject of leadership such as Ken Blanchard, Steven Covey, Edward Deming, Peter Drucker, John Gardner, Doug McGregor, Tom Peters, Peter Senge, and Thomas Sergiovanni, to name a few, have all contributed greatly to the body of recent scholarship on sound educational leadership. Yet transformational decision making focuses on a crucial characteristic of leadership that is tantamount to effective schooling and often overlooked. A significant void exists regarding sound, fundamental decision making for contemporary school leaders. One fact is certain amidst tremendous leadership; one bad or ill-conceived decision can eliminate or usurp an otherwise effective leader, lacking in great decision-making skills and absent an articulate conception of decision making. A sound understanding of transformational decision making is intended to complement the body of knowledge on leadership that currently exists and expand the knowledge base of school leadership in new and creative ways. Even great leaders struggle with tough decisions. Transformational decision making is intended to give leaders the knowledge necessary to make consistently effective decisions.

Although decisions in any school-based institution are intended to benefit the stakeholders, these same stakeholders make decision making challenging or difficult at times. Our judgments about decision making have been clouded by our concerns about ourselves, or how these decisions will affect people as individuals. A sound understanding of the "me" complex is necessary before grasping the understanding behind a decision-making paradigm shift.

Just a few decades ago, values-based priorities were profoundly different from today. Undeniably, our individual priorities regarding faith, country, family, self, and education have changed significantly in the past several decades. A philosophical shift in priorities often places the individual (i.e., self) first, creating fertile ground for ever-growing leadership challenges. It is critically important to understand this shifting phenomenon of priorities in order to accurately assess how they negatively influence decision making. Some leaders focus on how some action or decision will affect them or someone very close to them. This leads to determining whether to vote for it or against it, lobby for it or against it, argue for it or reject it, fight for it or run from it. The contemporary world remains largely about "me." Wrong or right, the basis of much decision making has a decades-old legacy of being rooted in how that decision will affect "me" or those near "me" (Prior, 2003; Wexler, 2003).

No doubt America's access to television and other emergent technologies has contributed to this societal shift in priorities from collective good to individual good by intensifying the instant and self-gratification of the information consumer. Information providers are continually competing to provide the "scoop," "eyewitness account," or "reality" version of almost anything perceived to be of interest. With this constant effort to "feed" information consumers, social values have been immersed in an orientation focused on the individual and his or her entitlement. The often shocking and provoking nature of information results in information consumers internalizing and personalizing these events. The anxiety-producing and instantaneous nature of information has the effect of creating a society whose values act to spin a protective cocoon around its individuals to keep one from harm's way. No doubt information systems (e.g., television, radio, Internet) have affected our actions, belief systems, and priorities more now than at any other time in our history. Similarly, school stakeholders have developed an expectation for well-embedded information systems that "feed" their instantaneous want of knowledge and information. These same stakeholders often want this information

personalized (i.e., what does this mean for me), having the effect of inviting them into the decision-making loop.

America has also grown in recent years to become a nation of consumers. Although information continues to feed this desire, products and services in the not-for-profit sector have become an immense consumer target as well. America's obsession with "things" has had a profound influence on schools. A values shift in recent decades has led school stakeholders to approach schools from a consumer's perspective, expecting choice, shared decision making, and entitlement while advocating for individual and often selfish outcomes.

These phenomena, along with other societal changes, such as an eroding middle class, have affected priority shifts from the common good to the individual good. These shifts ultimately influence how school leaders make effective decisions for the institutions they lead. School stakeholders usually place themselves, their children, and their loved ones as the highest priority in decision making. To do otherwise is the exception and not the norm. This often creates havoc for effective decision making. Our love of self, our love of those closest to us, and our desire for personal contentment all detract from effective decision making.

A priority consideration for transformational leadership is, "What is in the best interest of our students, faculty, staff, board members, administrators, parents, taxpayers, etc?" School leaders make decisions based on what is in the best interest of people. This seems natural as one initially ponders decision making, because school leaders have been groomed to do, think, and decide in this way. Furthermore, people want to live happy and productive lives. It cannot be disputed that people are very important, but no individual is as important as the populations of people who form the collective good.

A fundamental pedagogy is embedded in the words *institution* and *transformational.* Institution is the name of various school entities, including, but not limited to, a school corporation, school, organization, team, department, classroom, or union. To be considered an institution, the entity must be composed of stakeholders (i.e., a membership) and have a purpose. Furthermore, an institution must have some type of formal or informal leadership (e.g., board president, superintendent, principal, teacher, coach, department chair, or spokesperson). An institution is intended to represent the common good of its stakeholders. Transformational decision making is a pedagogy based on what is in the best interest of the institution (i.e., the common good) rather than what is in the best interest of the individuals within the institution. As paradoxical and competing as it may

seem, this is the essence of effective leadership decision making. Those embracing this pedagogy will fully understand why and how decisions are made, minimizing lengthy apologies or stress-laden responses immersed in a "me" orientation.

Summary

Most school leaders make great decisions some of the time, but few leaders make great decisions all of the time. The formula for great decision making can be understood and enjoyed if transformational decision making is embraced in an institutional context. Transformational decision making means thinking and acting in ways that reflect the common good of an educational institution. Broadly defined, institutions include any school entity that is composed of a membership (i.e., any school stakeholders), has a purpose, and possesses some type of formal or informal leadership.

Why do school leaders sometimes find it difficult to act decisively and effectively? What are the essential concepts for decision making, and how and why should school leaders act with a clear conscience in difficult decision-making situations? A rich base of scholarship exists regarding educational leadership, yet none of these renderings have sought the heart of decision-making pedagogy for contemporary leaders to answer these challenging questions in a way that is easy to understand and universally applicable.

Reflective Thinking

1. Imagine the most difficult decision you have made. Which aspects of the decision-making process went well? Which aspects of the decision-making process were challenges?

2. When you make a difficult decision, how do you respond to criticism and negative feedback?

3. What did you learn about yourself from the Decision Making Self-Assessment in the Resource?