So says Robyn R. Jackson, author of the best-selling *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching*. In this book for school leaders, Jackson presents a new model for understanding teaching as a combination of skill and will and explains the best ways to support individual teachers’ ongoing professional development. Here, you’ll learn how to meet your teachers where they are and help every one of them—from the raw novice to the savvy veteran, from the initiative-weary to the change-challenged to the already outstanding—develop the mindset and habits of master teachers, reach new levels of effectiveness, and rediscover joy in the classroom. Real-life examples, practical tools, and strategies for managing time and energy demands will help you build your capacity for more effective leadership as you raise the level of instructional excellence throughout your school.

To move your school forward, you must move the people in it. If you want a master teacher every classroom, you must commit to helping every teacher be a master teacher. That work begins here.
Never Underestimate Your Teachers

Instructional Leadership for Excellence in Every Classroom

Robyn R. Jackson

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Never Underestimate Your Teachers
Instructional Leadership for Excellence in Every Classroom

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INTRODUCTION: ANY TEACHER?

If we truly believe that all children can learn, then we must believe that all educators can learn, even in the face of contrary evidence.

—Roland S. Barth, On Common Ground

My conviction that any teacher can become a master teacher tends to provoke certain reactions. Some people smile indulgently and murmur something about the naiveté of youth. “You’ll learn,” they say. Others are taken aback by the boldness of the statement. “Any teacher?” they ask incredulously, while shaking their heads. “You haven’t met some of the teachers in my building.” Still others eye me suspiciously, as if I am some sort of huckster offering them a sip of snake oil to wash down a handful of magic beans.

Even those who agree with me in principle want to revise the statement. “I’d say most teachers,” they say cautiously. “Not every teacher is going to become a master teacher.”

This is the perspective that defines much of the professional development for educational leaders. It’s why we focus more on helping teachers fix aspects of practice than on helping them pursue limitless excellence. It explains why entire curricula and school programs have been built on the idea that student achievement can somehow be teacher-proofed. And this
habit of underestimating our teachers is what drives so many administrators and reformers to spend more time talking about getting rid of bad teachers than they do about transforming them into good ones. It seems that while we gladly embrace the idea that all children can learn successfully, we do not extend the same idealism to our colleagues. Any child can learn, but the adults? Well, that’s another story.

The tendency is to separate teachers into two categories: the silk purses and the sow’s ears. Although we acknowledge that a silk purse may occasionally turn out to be a sow’s ear, rarely does it happen the other way around. It’s as if we believe that teaching skill is a static gift: everyone is born with a certain amount, and it can’t be taught. But this idea creates a bizarre schism. The foundation of our work as educators is that we believe in the human potential to learn, to get better, to grow. Why do we embrace that fundamental belief when it comes to our students and yet reject it as unrealistic when it comes to our colleagues?

Maybe it’s because, in the experience of most of us, the really great teachers are a rare breed. Saying that any teacher can become a master teacher seems to sully the idea of masterful teaching, making it, well, common. And yet, shouldn’t masterful teaching be common? Shouldn’t every student have the benefit of a master teacher?

**Why Master Teachers?**

While we’re asking questions, why are master teachers so important, anyway? Does everyone have to be exceptional? Won’t a pretty good teacher or even a not-so-bad teacher do?

These are legitimate questions, and in order to answer them we must look at what we mean when we say “master teacher.” The quickest definition is that a master teacher is one who helps every student in the classroom meet or exceed the standards. Every student. The master teacher’s approach to teaching is seamless. Master teachers seem to instinctively know what to do to help each child learn. They have a large repertoire of skills, and they know when and how to deploy these skills to best help their students.

Master teachers consistently get at least a year’s worth of growth out of a year’s worth of school; some researchers even argue that master
teachers can help students make twice as much progress as an average teacher can (Hanushek, 2004). With an average teacher, a student who begins the year reading at a 3rd grade level might end the year reading at an early 4th grade level. Not bad—and certainly preferable to spending the year with an ineffective teacher and finishing the year still reading at a 3rd grade level. But put that student in a master teacher’s class, and by the end of the year, he will be reading at a late 4th grade level and possibly at a 5th grade level. Over time, having a master teacher can make up for disadvantages such as family background and poor early educational experiences. In fact, a student who has a master teacher five years in a row prior to 7th grade can overcome the average mathematics achievement gap that exists between lower- and higher-income students.

So, given the difference masterful teaching makes in students’ learning, I’ll ask again: Why shouldn’t masterful teaching be the goal—the attainable goal—of every teacher in the profession? And why shouldn’t promoting masterful teaching be a goal of every school leader? It should be, and it could be. And the very first step is to stop underestimating our teachers. Great instructional leadership means rejecting the idea of masterful teaching as gift endowed to a select few. It means seeing masterful teaching for what it really is: a combination of skills and attitudes that can be learned . . . and that can be taught.

The Test of Leadership

Leadership is not so much getting people to follow you as it is working through other people to accomplish the vision and goals of the institution. Just as teachers might be judged by how well they handle their most challenging students, we school leaders can be judged by how we handle our most challenging teachers. It is easy to lead those who want to be led, but being able to lead those who initially resist? That’s the ultimate test of leadership.

I learned this lesson the hard way (ironically enough, as I was writing this book). Some things to know about me: I was a pretty good middle school administrator. I have coached hundreds of principals, assistant principals, headmasters, deans, and central office administrators on how to help any teacher become a master teacher. I have written a book
(Jackson, 2008) that provides step-by-step guidance on how to have difficult conversations with teachers. And I regularly give speeches on the topic, write articles, and offer advice to administrators who are frustrated and down to their last straw. It would be reasonable to think that I would know exactly what to do if my own leadership were tested, right?

Wrong.

Mrs. Quinton* was a difficult teacher, and she defied my ability to help her. Her problem was not that she didn’t know how to teach; it was that she was interested in teaching only certain students—the bright, motivated ones who were already eager to learn. For years, she had been considered one of the best teachers at her school, and she had long occupied a leadership position on the staff. Her colleagues were fiercely loyal to her because she did them little favors; they would not change unless she said so, even if they believed that changing was best for the school. When it came to dealing with Mrs. Quinton, the principal had thrown up his hands. He was afraid to get on her bad side because he knew that if he did, he would lose the cooperation of his entire staff. They would pick her over him.

Enter me. The leadership expert. The fancy paid consultant, brought in to help this school increase rigor in every classroom.

At first, I tried to befriend Mrs. Quinton and convince her that the kind of changes I had in mind would be good for the school. She agreed with me in principle but had very different ideas of how to implement change. In fact, she only wanted to make marginal adjustments to the way things were run, which basically amounted to no change at all. So I tried to work around her, talking with other teachers and providing them resources. Many of them would agree with me in private conversation and make plans to run their classrooms differently, only to change their minds after talking with her.

One morning, after a particularly difficult interaction with Mrs. Quinton, I headed to the principal’s office in a huff, my head full of how impossible she was and how she was poisoning the attitudes of the rest of the staff. I was ready to tell him it was time for her to go. But when I sat down in his office, I noticed a copy of my book, *The Instructional Leader’s Guide to Strategic Conversations with Teachers*, sitting on his desk. How could I

*The teachers and principals you’ll meet in this book are all real people, not composites. Unless otherwise noted, their names and a few distinguishing details have been changed.
tell him to get rid of this teacher when my book made the case that every teacher could be “moved and improved”? How could I say that Mrs. Quinton was impossible to work with when I had provided templates that purported to help any leader work with any teacher?

The easy thing to do would have been to get rid of her. But doing that would have seriously damaged the school culture, which would itself have impeded the school’s progress. Instead, the principal and I formulated a new plan to work with Mrs. Quinton. When all was said and done, we helped her not only embrace the changes we were trying to make at the school but also improve her own instructional practice and become a much more reflective teacher.

When we become instructional leaders, we don’t stop being teachers. The difference is that now we teach through other people. Our biggest leadership challenge is not that we don’t know what to do to increase student success; our biggest challenge is that we must get our teachers to do it.

Your school is only as good as your worst teacher. What’s more, you are only as good as your ability to handle your worst teacher. Many books on leadership focus on rigorously examining data, developing a vision, and building a proper organizational infrastructure in order to make schools more effective. And they’re right. These things are important, and they can be powerful. Yet if you do all that and cannot communicate your vision and your plans to the people who must carry them out, if you cannot inspire teachers to change, if you cannot monitor and give feedback in a way that will ensure that change happens, then you will never get the results you are seeking.

We all have in our heads the image of the school leader who has such a compelling vision, such a strong personality, that the school changes in spite of itself. But the truth is much more boring than that: If you want to move your school forward, you have to move the people in it. If you want excellent instruction in every classroom, you have to help every teacher become an excellent instructor.

Using This Book

In the pages to come, you will learn a process for helping every teacher become a master teacher—a process that I have developed over the past
10 years in my work as an instructional coach, school administrator, and educational consultant. It is the result of the lessons I’ve learned as I’ve helped principals, assistant principals, central office leaders, instructional coaches, and superintendents grapple with the very real challenges they face in their urban, suburban, and rural schools throughout the United States. The strategies I’ll be sharing have worked time and time again, and if you really want to move your teachers and your school forward, this is the work you must do.

Never Underestimate Your Teachers does not address developing a mission statement or communicating your vision to your staff. It won’t teach you how to set goals and achieve them. There are other books that do a good job of showing you how to do those things—all of which are important in leading a school. But this book is not about leading a school; it’s about leading teachers.

Over the course of six chapters, I am going to show you how to recognize good teaching and what to do if you aren’t seeing it in the classroom. We’ll look at evaluation as something undertaken not to identify and get rid of bad teachers but to help bad ones become good, good ones become great, and great ones become even greater. You will learn how to meet these teachers where they are and, through a series of supports, help them all move forward. I’ll share real-life stories of how I and other school leaders have tackled the kinds of challenges you face in your school. Many of the skills and strategies we used are ones you already know; what you’ll learn is how to leverage those skills and strategies to make a real impact.

Chapter 1 provides the foundation for this knowledge, deconstructing what good teaching really is and how it incorporates both teacher skill and teacher will. The chapters that follow examine how you can affect both of these aspects so that over time your teachers get better and better at what they do. You’ll find “Yes, but . . .” sections designed to address common concerns and “Takeaways” that summarize each chapter’s key points—and are perfect for sharing with other members of your instructional leadership team. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses how to bring all the strategies you have learned together to shape a professional culture at your school where every teacher is on a sure pathway to masterful teaching and, as a result, every student is on a surer pathway to success.
If you are an instructional coach, you’ll learn strategies for helping teachers grow and want to grow. You’ll learn how to help teachers prepare for and respond to observations and evaluations and how to inspire and support all the teachers you serve to work toward mastery. If you are a teacher leader (i.e., a department head, a team leader, a lead teacher), you’ll learn strategies for moving your team forward toward team and school goals. You’ll also learn how to straddle the dual roles of teacher and leader in a way that best supports the teachers you serve. If you are a school-based administrator, you’ll learn how to move your entire school toward a professional culture that is focused on masterful teaching, and how to help each of your teachers ultimately get there. You’ll learn specific strategies for facilitating the observation process and helping teachers use the observation process to grow toward mastery. And, if you are a district leader, you’ll learn how to best support the schools you lead so that every teacher in every school is continuously improving. You’ll also learn strategies that will help you design and implement a teacher evaluation process that truly improves teaching and learning. No matter which of these roles is yours, you’ll learn how to identify what is important for teachers to focus on and how to develop better teachers and, ultimately, better schools.

To help you succeed in this very important work, this book’s Appendix contains several other tools to help you put what you are learning into practice, including diagnostics you can use to help you determine a teacher’s skill level and prime motivator and to determine your own prime motivator as well. We have also created a companion website at www.mindstepsinc.com/lead so that we can share even more tools, tips, and strategies.

After reading this book, you’ll know exactly how to assess and move the teachers you serve toward mastery. You’ll have a plan for getting started and all the tools you need to make it work. And you’ll know how to access other resources to support and sustain your work over time. In short, you’ll have everything you need to build and lead master teachers.

Now, let’s get to work.
Experiences where you are forced to slow down, make errors, and correct them—as you would if you were walking up an ice-covered hill, slipping and stumbling as you go—end up making you swift and graceful without your realizing it.

—Daniel Coyle, The Talent Code

Walk into Mr. Ishigowa’s* classroom and you wouldn’t be impressed. There are no objectives written on the board. The bulletin boards display no student work. In fact, the walls are bare, save an ancient poster of Einstein and a chart illustrating different geometric shapes. Watching Mr. Ishigowa teach, you wonder why his students—mostly minority boys, with pants hanging well below their waists and baseball caps pulled low over their eyes—are even paying attention. Mr. Ishigowa doesn’t wow his students with dramatic lectures or entertain them with beguiling stories. He doesn’t group them into jigsaws or dream up clever games for them to play. He just teaches math. For 45 straight minutes he is at the board writing formulas, explaining angles, showing students how to calculate the

*The master teachers in this chapter are called by their real names.
slope of a line. Short, bespectacled, and thin; bald, save for a few wisps of gray hair that stick up on top; and wearing pants pulled up almost to his chest, Mr. Ishigowa's physical presence defies the image of a master teacher. So does his quiet manner and heavily accented speech. And yet . . . he can take any student—even students who have failed geometry twice, even fourth-year freshmen—and help them pass the state geometry test. Mr. Ishigowa is a master teacher.

* In Mrs. Meneker's classroom, music blares from the stereo on her desk. Half of the student desks are pushed casually against the far wall. Few if any of her 11th graders are sitting down, though: They are standing in corners talking or hunched over tables coloring while occasionally sipping sodas. Some are slouched in a row of beanbag chairs along the back wall of the classroom, eating chips and laughing as they flip through magazines. Mrs. Meneker works with one student at her desk, while the other 29 seem to be on their own.

But look more closely: The students standing in the corner aren't just talking; they're looking at a map and debating the value of the Louisiana Purchase. Those students coloring? They're drawing maps of what the United States looked like before and after the Louisiana Purchase, discussing different possibilities for dividing the states, and debating which should be slave states and which should be free states—and using their maps to bolster their point. The students slouched in the beanbag chairs reading? They are looking through collections of political cartoons from the time and selecting which they will address in an argumentative essay. Mrs. Meneker and the student at her desk are reviewing the student's last test results and setting long-term goals for the next assessment. Before the week is over, Mrs. Meneker will have a similar meeting with all of her other students. Even though some struggle now because they aren't really prepared for the class, by the end of the year, all of them will pass the AP exam with at least a score of 3. Mrs. Meneker is a master teacher.

*
Mrs. Marshall doesn’t work with students after school. She doesn’t stay in class during lunch and work with them, either. She doesn’t give make-up work and rarely offers extra credit. Her gradebook has few grades in it. When she lectures to her 6th and 7th graders, she does so from the front of the classroom using nothing but a short list of topics written on the chalkboard—no PowerPoint, no interactive whiteboard, no video, no technology at all. At the beginning of her lecture, she tells her students, “I am not a tape recorder and there is no rewind button on me, so you will have to pay attention.” After the lecture, her students work on their assignment sheets—and there is an assignment sheet almost every day. When asked, she will tell you that her students determine their own grades. If they want to pass, they will pass; if they want to fail, that is their choice as well. Every one of Mrs. Marshall’s students signs a learning contract for each unit of study. They are required to do a certain number of assignments, and if they do them, they earn a C for the unit. Those who want to earn a higher grade complete extra assignments according to the contract. And although the “choice to fail” is up to the student, few if any of them ever make that choice. Mrs. Marshall is a master teacher.

∗

In Mr. Davis’s classroom the students, all male, sit in rows—razor-straight rows, facing the board. They raise their hands for permission to sharpen their pencils; often, their requests are denied. Mr. Davis doesn’t like a lot of movement in his classroom. He refers to his 4th graders by their last names and insists that they refer to him as “Sir.” Mr. Davis runs a tight ship. At first, it seems a bit much for 9- and 10-year-olds. After all, they are still children and such military precision seems a little draconian. But for this group of boys, the structure helps them focus on planning the class garden using sophisticated tables based on average rainfall, crop yield, and the merits of organic compost over commercial fertilizer. The structure helps them concentrate on developing their own hypotheses about the optimal time to plant and whether it is better to start the seeds in a pot in the classroom or plant them directly in the soil. The structure helps them resist using yardsticks as swords rather than using them to measure
the proper size of their lot. And the structure helps them develop the self-discipline to work independently or in small groups without becoming distracted. They’re learning to think like scientists. Mr. Davis is a master teacher.

∗

If I were to ask you to close your eyes right now and picture a master teacher, odds are that you wouldn’t conjure up Mr. Ishigowa, Mrs. Meneker, Mrs. Marshall, or Mr. Davis. We each have a sense of what a master teacher “looks like” and what a master teacher does. And yet in classrooms all around the world there are teachers doing a masterful job of helping students meet or exceed the standards who don’t look at all like what we would imagine and who may not engage in the laundry list of best practices we would expect. There are also many teachers out there who conform exactly to our personal “master teacher” schema and yet have students who are making little to no progress and may even be consistently failing.

We need a better schema.

What Is Teaching?

Before we pin down what masterful teaching is, we should backtrack to consider teaching in general. All teaching is a combination of skill and will.

Skill is the science of teaching; it involves a teacher’s pedagogical and content knowledge. It determines how well teachers know the subject and how well they can help students learn it. Will has to do with a teacher’s passion; it is the art of teaching. It involves teachers’ drive to help all students be successful. Master teachers have high skill and high will. They don’t just know their craft; they also have the drive and determination to be the best at it.

Because teaching is such a complex act, cursory feedback and standardized support can never help teachers grow to the master level. Unless you understand both their skill and their will, you cannot provide the targeted help that they need. Rather than rely on Hollywood images of effective teaching or our own notions of what good teaching should look
like (based on how we were taught or what we ourselves did as teachers), assessing a teacher’s effectiveness requires a much more objective and comprehensive idea of what masterful teaching looks like and how it incorporates both skill and will.

**Teacher Skill**

As noted, the skill component of masterful teaching comprises both content knowledge and pedagogy. Teachers who understand content but cannot figure out how to help students understand it cannot be effective in the classroom. Neither can teachers who know several strategies for helping students learn but not how to apply these strategies in different situations and tailor them to all learners, or teachers who are excellent instructional designers but poor classroom managers. Pedagogy and content-area knowledge are intricately intertwined and cannot be separated into two distinct categories; teachers must have *both* to be considered skillful.

Teacher skill is rooted in the seven principles of effective instruction (Jackson, 2009), a concept we will explore in greater detail in Chapter 2. In short, though, highly skilled teachers start where their students are, know where students are going, expect to get them there, support them along the way, use feedback to help themselves and their students get better, focus on quality not quantity, and never work harder than their students. As a result, highly skilled teachers are good planners. They know how to structure a lesson and a unit to ensure that students learn and understand the material. They plan both formative and summative assessments and use the feedback these assessments render to adjust their instruction throughout the unit. Those with high levels of skill structure lessons so that learning becomes inevitable rather than accidental. They understand how to sequence instruction, how to anticipate student confusion, and how to explain difficult concepts in ways that help students develop increasing understanding over time. They know different ways to explain concepts and how to match their collection of instructional strategies to individual students’ needs.

Another essential component of teacher skill is classroom management: knowing how to structure the classroom so that students can focus on learning. When inappropriate behaviors distract students, highly skilled
teachers know how to help students quickly get back on track. They know how to balance structure and support with autonomy and how to help students take responsibility for and ownership of their own learning and behavior over time.

**Teacher Will**

The *will* component of masterful teaching is rooted in the desire to help all students learn and the determination to ensure that all students *do* learn. It’s more than simple motivation, however; will encompasses a teacher’s entire attitude and approach to teaching and to students. It’s what powers a teacher to find ways to reach students even in the face of huge obstacles. It’s about persistence, trying strategy after strategy until one succeeds. Teachers with very high levels of will see teaching not as a job but as a vocation.

Will is what drives the teachers who continually refine and hone their craft, reflect on practice, and embrace data and feedback. It’s why these teachers set high expectations of themselves and their students, why they are not content with the status quo. They want their students to keep growing and reaching, and they model that in their own practice. Teachers with high levels of teaching will understand the importance of relationships and work hard to make sure that every student in the room is safe, engaged, and connected.

An individual teacher’s will is affected by countless factors, including working conditions, personal problems, relationships with colleagues, passion about a particular subject, district constraints, school climate, and student attitudes. Will can fluctuate throughout the course of a career, a school year, or even a day. Teachers often start their careers with high will but, because they don’t receive the right kind of support, become discouraged and frustrated and lose their will over time. Conversely, a teacher may begin a school year with low will and meet a group of students that is so inspirational that the teacher’s will skyrockets during the course of the year. Teaching will is not static and must constantly be nurtured if it is to be sustained.
The Will/Skill Matrix: Where the Path to Professional Development Begins

Given that teaching comprises both skill and will, and that teachers possess varying degrees of each, considering where an individual teacher falls on a simple matrix of skill level and will level (see Figure 1.1) gives us a new way to think about that teacher’s professional development needs.

The matrix allows us to identify four teacher profiles or “types”—high will/low skill, low will/low skill, high will/high skill, and low will/high skill—and these designations offer an approach to the analysis and development
of masterful teaching that is far more useful than the familiar stereotypes and the same old received wisdom. Each type of teacher has a different set of needs and, thus, needs a different type of instructional leadership. Understanding where teachers in your school fall on the Will/Skill Matrix will help you identify a leadership approach that directly addresses their individual needs.

Let’s take an initial look at the four general types. You’ll learn more about each in the pages to come.

**High Will/Low Skill**

High-will/low-skill teachers are often enthusiastic about teaching. They know that they have areas they need to work on, and want to improve. They often seek out a supervisor’s feedback, enthusiastically participate in professional development, and try new strategies or ideas in their classrooms. But because their practice is not rooted in principles, their reliance on strategies makes their instruction disjointed.

High-will/low-skill teachers tend to be new to the profession. However, veteran teachers who have not found ways to integrate their teaching knowledge over time can also fit the profile. High-will/low-skill teachers often have very lofty ideals about teaching, which unfortunately can lead them to implementing instructional strategies that do students more harm than good. Or, in their eagerness to improve, they may try out several instructional strategies without giving much thought as to appropriateness for their students.

High-will/low-skill teachers are willing to learn. With the right kind of support, they can quickly get better. The danger is that without the right kind of support, these teachers can quickly lose their enthusiasm and become low-will/low-skill teachers.

**Low Will/Low Skill**

Low-will/low-skill teachers have, in many ways, simply given up. They see teaching as a job rather than as a profession or a calling. Many are “retired on the job” or are biding their time until they can move on to other things. They “phone it in” and do not seem invested in their craft.
What Is Masterful Teaching?

Low-will/low-skill teachers do not buck the status quo; theirs is a more passive resistance to change. They tend to stay out of the way and do only what is absolutely necessary and no more. They do not volunteer for additional duties. They participate marginally on teams, letting others take on the bulk of the work, and passively attend meetings without contributing anything. They work hard at being invisible.

In some ways, the low-will/low-skill teacher is the most difficult to move toward mastery. It’s very challenging to try to address both will and skill at the same time, so you need to determine which to take on first. If it appears that low will has resulted in low skill, it makes sense to work on will first. But other times these teachers have lost their will over time because they have been repeatedly unsuccessful in the classroom. In that case, it makes sense to work on their skill first; as they become more successful in the classroom, their will increases.

High Will/High Skill

High-will/high-skill teachers are master teachers. They are adept at both the art and the science of teaching. Not only are they highly motivated and committed to their students’ success, but they have the knowledge and skill to make their students successful.

High-will/high-skill teachers operate according to the principles of effective instruction. They have integrated their practice to the point where it seems that they instinctively know the right thing to do. But they are not content to rest on their laurels. Their high will means that they are constantly refining their practice, learning new ways to reach students, and seeking input and feedback from others to hone their craft.

The danger with high-will/high-skill teachers is that without the right kind of leadership and support, they can become bored and seek new opportunities elsewhere, or become frustrated and grow cynical over time. Because they are so effective with students, they take on more responsibilities or work with the most challenging students. Many want to do a good job and will work hard even in the most impossible of circumstances, but over time they can become burned out. In that case, a valuable high-will/high-skill teacher can become a low-will/high-skill teacher.
Low Will/High Skill

Low-will/high-skill teachers understand the science of teaching but have neglected the art. They know their subjects and have fairly decent pedagogy, but they lack the soft skills that make teaching truly masterful. They have the skills to be effective teachers, but for a variety of reasons simply do not do what is best for their students.

Because they are fairly effective teachers, they may have an inflated view of their own practice. They may think that because they have to some degree mastered many of the skills of teaching they have mastered teaching itself. This makes them particularly unreceptive to feedback, especially if it highlights areas where their practice needs improving.

Low-will/high-skill teachers can sometimes become the saboteurs of the school and of any attempt at change. Because they don’t feel that they need any improvement, they may actively resist efforts to provide feedback, institute reforms, or start new programs—often to the detriment of students. They also can become very cynical, identifying ways that this strategy or that reform won’t work rather than finding ways to make it work.

The good news is that many low-will/high-skill teachers started out as high-will/high-skill teachers who experienced some disappointment or frustration that has sapped them of their will. Thus, there is every reason to believe that with the right kind of leadership and support they will once again function at the master teacher level.

It is important to understand that a teacher’s “type” is fluid. Teachers may shift from one quadrant to the next as they move through their careers, change courses or subjects, switch schools, move to different grade levels, work on different teams, or experience different events in their personal lives. Thus, you cannot label a teacher as one teacher type and expect that label to still apply in a few months or years. To truly help every teacher become a master teacher, you have to be aware of what quadrant they occupy on any particular day, semester, or year. This means continually examining data, both formal and informal, and knowing what to look for.
Checkpoint Summary

Take the first steps toward supporting every teacher’s progress toward mastery by figuring out their “type”—where they fall, right now, on the Will/Skill Matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEACHER TYPE</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>LOOKS LIKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High will/low skill</td>
<td>Enthusiastic; idealistic; willing to learn</td>
<td>Seeks feedback and explores new strategies and ideas, but implementation is inconsistent and ineffective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low will/low skill</td>
<td>Discouraged, not invested; “retired on the job”</td>
<td>Does not volunteer or contribute; passive; tries to stay beneath the radar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High will/high skill</td>
<td>Motivated and skillful</td>
<td>Easily identifies and implements appropriate strategies; explores new ideas, seeks feedback, and refines practice; takes on challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low will/high skill</td>
<td>Skillful but disinterested; “seen it all”</td>
<td>Unreceptive to feedback; resists efforts to try new approaches; saboteurs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Leading All Types to Mastery

It is as critical to provide teachers with differentiated leadership as it is to provide students with differentiated instruction. Tailoring your leadership approach to the skill and will of the individuals you are leading is key to helping all teachers embrace change and significantly improve their practice. Not tailoring your leadership approach can lead to undue frustration—for you and the teacher—and undermine your leadership goals.

For instance, many leaders make the mistake of trying to solve a will problem with a skill solution. They hope that by providing more and better professional development or providing additional resources, they
can raise a teacher's will. Or they take the opposite approach and try to solve a skill problem with a will solution, wasting time trying to inspire a struggling teacher to do better when what that teacher needs is specific help with developing skill. Understanding a teacher's will and skill is not only more efficient, in that you don’t waste time on the wrong leadership approach, but it's also more successful. It helps you identify a targeted approach that will make the biggest difference for your teachers.

In the next few chapters, you will learn strategies for understanding and building teacher skill and will. In the last chapter, you will learn how to put those strategies together to create a strategic leadership approach for the teachers you serve.

YES, BUT . . .
What if a teacher thinks that he is high skill or high will but I think just the opposite?

Sometimes you will assess a teacher’s skill or will and come to a conclusion that differs from the teacher’s own perception of his skill or will. What do you do when you run across a teacher whose self-assessment seems inaccurate or downright delusional?

For starters, remember that you don’t ever have to share your assessment of a teacher’s will or skill with the teacher. It’s a tool for you, intended to guide your approach, your work.

You also don’t have to convince a teacher of his low skill or will in order to help him; the strategies you’ll read about in the chapters to come are designed to work even for teachers who think they are closer to mastery than they really are. So don’t get caught up in convincing teachers to assess their own will and skill in the same way that you have, and take heart that the kind of support you provide will help them develop a more accurate self-assessment over time.
### CHAPTER 1 TAKEAWAYS

**Understanding Teacher Skill and Teacher Will**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSIDER</th>
<th>KEY QUESTION</th>
<th>INDICATORS OF HIGH SKILL</th>
<th>INDICATORS OF HIGH WILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observational data</td>
<td>What does the teacher’s instructional practice look like?</td>
<td>• Posts objectives and essential questions.</td>
<td>• Interacts well with students (responding to questions, supporting range of learners, using motivational strategies, and encouraging student engagement).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>How does the teacher respond to feedback?</td>
<td>• Implements suggestions or otherwise acts on feedback.</td>
<td>• Engages in reflective conversations about feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher artifacts</td>
<td>What instructional materials has the teacher produced, and how do they align with the standards, the curriculum, and the learning needs of the students?</td>
<td>• Designs lesson plans, assessments, and assignments that align with standards, are appropriate for students’ ability levels, and reflect sound pedagogy.</td>
<td>• Communicates with parents and comments on student papers and products.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom formative assessment tools and data</td>
<td>How does the teacher create/use formative assessment?</td>
<td>• Uses student data/results to improve instruction and practice.</td>
<td>• Sets and follows classroom rules, policies, and procedures that support student progress.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Aligns assessments with instructional goals and unit objectives.</td>
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<td>• Adjusts instruction based on assessment data.</td>
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<td>• Follows up with individual students regarding their performance and supports students accordingly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom summative assessment data</td>
<td>How many of the teacher's students have mastered the standards?</td>
<td>• Analyzes data/results and targets areas for improvement (students and instructional practice).</td>
<td>• Takes ownership of data/results and uses them to improve instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal conversations</td>
<td>How does the teacher view his or her practice?</td>
<td>• Understands where students are and what they need to do to move forward.</td>
<td>• Takes ownership of student progress.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Has a good sense of pedagogy; instruction is driven by overarching, instructionally sound principles.</td>
<td>• Shows enthusiasm for new ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation on teams, committees</td>
<td>How does the teacher interact with colleagues?</td>
<td>• Makes valuable contributions; shares resources.</td>
<td>• Seeks input from colleagues and is appreciative of support and feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Implements team feedback in classroom.</td>
<td>• Shares ideas and the work of the team.</td>
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</table>
3. Use Video

Teachers can record themselves teaching a lesson and then send it to their colleagues for comments or suggestions. This is a way to reap the benefits of observation-based peer feedback without the difficulty of juggling schedules and securing substitutes.

4. Use a Work-in-Progress Protocol

Establish a process in which each week, one or two teachers on an established team (e.g., grade-alike teams or members of a professional learning community) bring in something they are working on—perhaps a new instructional strategy, a new lesson plan, or a new planning approach. They present what they are working on, why they chose that particular approach, and what they hope it will accomplish with their students. After each teacher’s brief presentation (no more than 3 minutes), that teacher must listen quietly as the rest of the teachers in the group provide feedback or attempt to improve the strategy in some way. At the end of the discussion (which may last anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes), the original teacher presenter responds to colleagues’ feedback, asks clarifying questions, and thanks the group for their input. Then the teacher goes back to the classroom, implements and finishes the work, and reports back to the group.

5. Use an “All-Day Staff Meeting”

In many schools, teachers who do not share the same planning period have difficulty finding time to work together. At Mindsteps, we’ve arrived at a creative solution to help schools get around the limitations of their master schedules—the “All-Day Staff Meeting.” No, this isn’t a single faculty meeting that lasts all day; it’s a time-swapping arrangement. The information and topics you would typically cover with all teachers during an after-school meeting, you instead discuss with small groups of teachers in a series of meetings held during their regular planning period. This frees the faculty meeting time after school for teacher collaboration and co-planning.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn R. Jackson, PhD, is a former high school teacher and middle school administrator. She is the founder and president of Mindsteps Inc., a professional development firm for teachers and administrators that provides workshops and materials designed to help any teacher reach every student. Dr. Jackson is the author of Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching, The Differentiation Workbook, and The Instructional Leader’s Guide to Strategic Conversations with Teachers, as well as the how-to guides in the Mastering the Principles of Great Teaching series. You can sign up for Dr. Jackson’s monthly e-newsletter at www.mindstepsinc.com, follow her on Twitter at @robyn_mindsteps, or reach her via e-mail at robyn@mindstepsinc.com.