

THE PRINCIPAL 50

Critical Leadership
Questions *for*
Inspiring Schoolwide
Excellence

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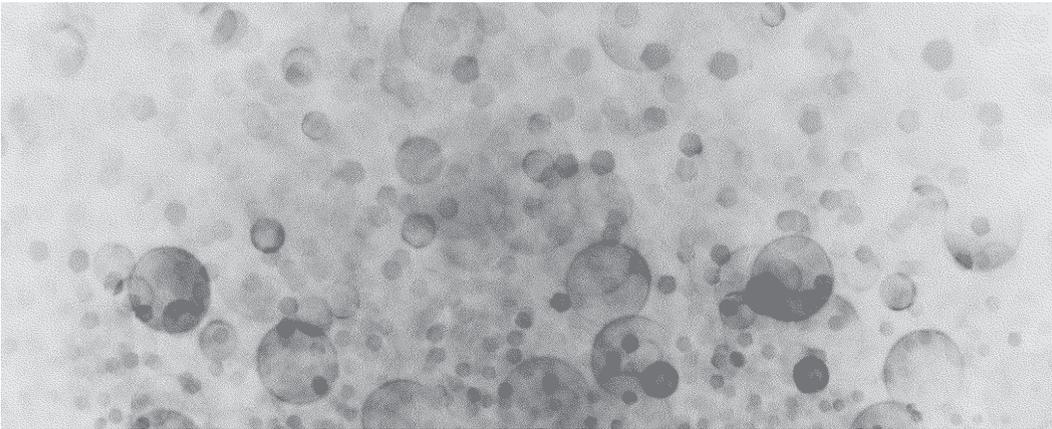
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CHAPTER

1

**The Attitude of
the Leader**

Q: Do I lead with a definite purpose that drives everything I say and do?

- Why do I lead?
- Why do I *want* to lead?

For your leadership to be successful, you must ask yourself these two questions daily. The answers to the questions represent your *purpose for leading*, which is certain to drive your approach to inspiring excellence in your school. Your purpose serves as a constant reminder to you of who you are—of what you are about—as a schoolwide leader.

I'm fond of the saying, "A person without a purpose is like a word without a definition—meaningless." You can't achieve maximum results without defining why you do this work in the first place. Why do you get up in the morning and come to school only to face the countless difficult challenges that crop up every day?

- Your purpose is *who you are as the leader of the school*.
- Your purpose is *the foundation upon which your passion is built*.
- Your purpose is *you*.

When I worked as a principal, I defined my purpose as follows: *To motivate, educate, and empower my students daily*. This was why I woke up in the morning—this was why I did the work that I did. My purpose drove me—it pushed me and pulled me. To my knowledge, I never deviated from my defined purpose. Additionally, I ensured that my leadership style reflected my purpose, making it evident

to the entire school community. In order for me to inspire excellence in my school, I needed to motivate, educate, and empower students daily.

After you have defined your purpose for leading, you must further answer the following questions:

- Will I *walk* in my purpose?
- Will I *lead* in my purpose?
- Will my purpose *be evident* to the entire school community?

When you can answer a full-throated “Yes!” to those questions, you will be on your way to inspiring profound excellence in your school.

Q: Do I aim to be intentional about what I do as a leader?

- Random
- Reactive
- Responsive
- Haphazard

These four words spring immediately to mind when I reflect back on my first year as a middle school principal. During my first year, I reacted to situations as they arose, which left me “putting out fires” all day, every day. As the leader of the school, I *had* to respond to crises as they occurred, but doing so took me away from fulfilling my purpose.

As I grew in the principalship, I came to the gradual realization that a random and haphazard approach to events was not compatible with effective leadership. I needed to “step up my game” in a big way—to think and act with *intentionality*. In fact, over time, “intentionality” became my byword. I learned that if we as a school community were going to meet all the pressures and demands that were thrust upon us, we had to be able to spend our days *acting on our intentions* rather than *reacting to situations*.

The same is true for you. With all the pressures you will endure throughout your career, you do not have the time to devote entire days to taking a random, haphazard, and reactive approach to leadership. Instead, you must

- ➔ *Define* your purpose,
- ➔ *Resolve to be intentional* about living your purpose, and
- ➔ *Live* your purpose.

Every morning, before you get started for the day, *envision yourself living your purpose* so you can see beforehand what you are going to accomplish. This foresight will help you to turn your intentions into reality—you can now be constantly and consistently intentional both about student outcomes and about your students’ daily school experiences. In high-performing schools, leadership focuses on creating memorable buildingwide experiences—the type that help mold students into successful adults. The key is to employ *intentionality* when creating these experiences for students.

Q: Do I treat my leadership as a mission rather than as a career?

➔ *Your leadership should be your mission.*

It's normal to think of what you do or plan to do for a living as a profession, a career, or a job. The problem with these labels is that they're limiting—they don't tell the complete story. I suggest that you look beyond these labels and consider what you do to be your *mission*.

I always say that if you want to stop a person on a job, all you have to do is put your hand up and say, "Stop!" By contrast, a person on a *mission* will refuse to stop. When you are on a mission, you have a completely different mind-set than you do when you are simply doing your job; you will not stop until your mission has been accomplished. I'll take an educator on a mission over one on a job on my team any day.

As you live out your purpose as a school leader, you are bound to encounter students who are dealing with a wide variety of life challenges—in some cases, challenges so great that they eclipse the importance of school for students. Among other negative ramifications, these challenges can prevent your students from understanding the correlation between working hard in school and achieving success later in life.

This is where you come in.

You have to think, *I don't care how great the challenges my students face are. They are with me right now, and I'm on a mission to see all of them achieve excellence!* When you as the school leader express this attitude in the things that you say and do, your students' chances for success increase exponentially. You are no longer defining what you do as a job, profession, or career—you are proclaiming it to be your mission, with the ultimate goal being the academic excellence of your students.

Q: Do I have a vision of what I expect my students to achieve?

→ *Vision: the ability to see that which has been projected but has not yet been attained.*

To inspire excellence from your entire school community, you must possess and foster a *vision of excellence* that the entire school community shares.

I have said to countless educators over the years that earnestly envisioning success is more than half the battle. Unfortunately, I have met any number of educators who have told me that they simply cannot envision widespread success in their schools due to the challenges that their students have to endure in their homes and communities. I find this to be highly problematic. All school leaders, but particularly those in communities facing systemic challenges such as poverty, drugs, or violence, *must* inspire excellence by helping students and staff to envision it in action, and

must also consistently reinforce their own expectations for the school. Ask yourself:

- What is my vision for my students?
- What will my students achieve?
- How high will my students soar?
- Can I envision where my students will wind up as a result of my leadership?
- Can I envision many of my students on the honor roll?
- Can I envision most of my students going on to college?

A word to the aspiring school leaders: The mission of the principalship doesn't begin once you become a principal—it begins once you have *made the decision* to become a principal. It is at this point that you must begin to develop a vision for how successful your students will be as a result of your leadership—a vision that must always remain at the forefront of your thinking. Be sure to encourage your school community to claim and take ownership of the vision: Schools that have a *collective vision of excellence* have a much greater chance of attaining success than those that don't.

Q: Do I see myself as the number-one determinant of the success or failure of my students?

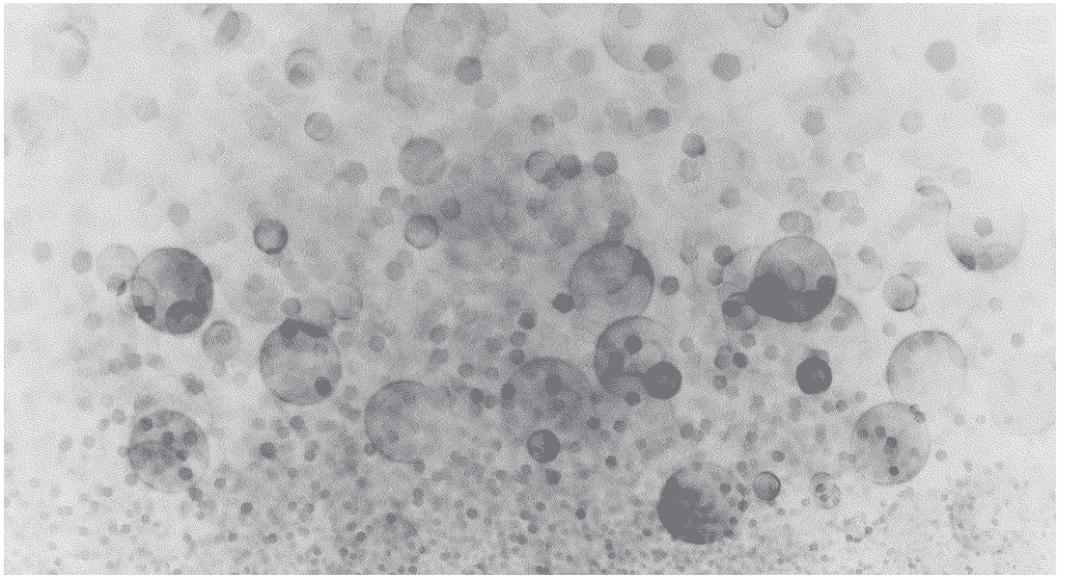
When I ask this question in my professional development workshops with school leaders, it usually generates lively,

passionate, and heated discussions. Some school leaders absolutely see themselves as uniquely responsible for their students' success. They believe strongly that once their students arrive at school, *those students belong to them*—the outside world and its influences no longer matter. Students succeed or fail according to the school leaders' overall performance. Excuses have no place in these school leaders' minds.

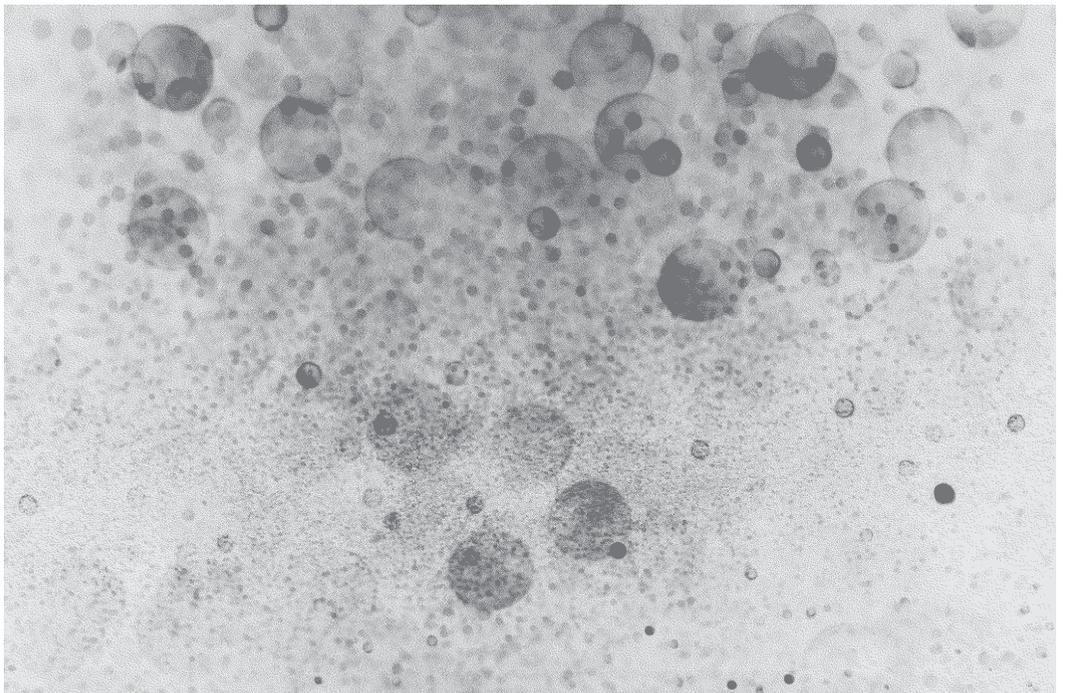
Then there are the other school leaders—the ones who find it impossible to take full responsibility for their students' education given all of the other factors in their lives. I remind these leaders that the success of their students boils down to the attitude behind their leadership: If students are going to soar, they require school leaders who will accept nothing less than excellence from them. This fact does not in any way diminish the significance of outside variables that may adversely impact student motivation or the roles of teachers and parents. But at the end of the day, school leadership matters. When the principal can maintain the attitude that his or her overall leadership determines the success or failure of the school, students will benefit greatly. As I like to say, “Show me a school with extraordinary teachers in every classroom but an ineffective principal and I'll show you an underperforming school.”

You *must* see yourself as the number-one determinant of the success or failure of your students. How are you going to lead effectively if you lack the willingness to hold yourself accountable for your students' achievements? If you are living out your purpose at a low-performing school, how

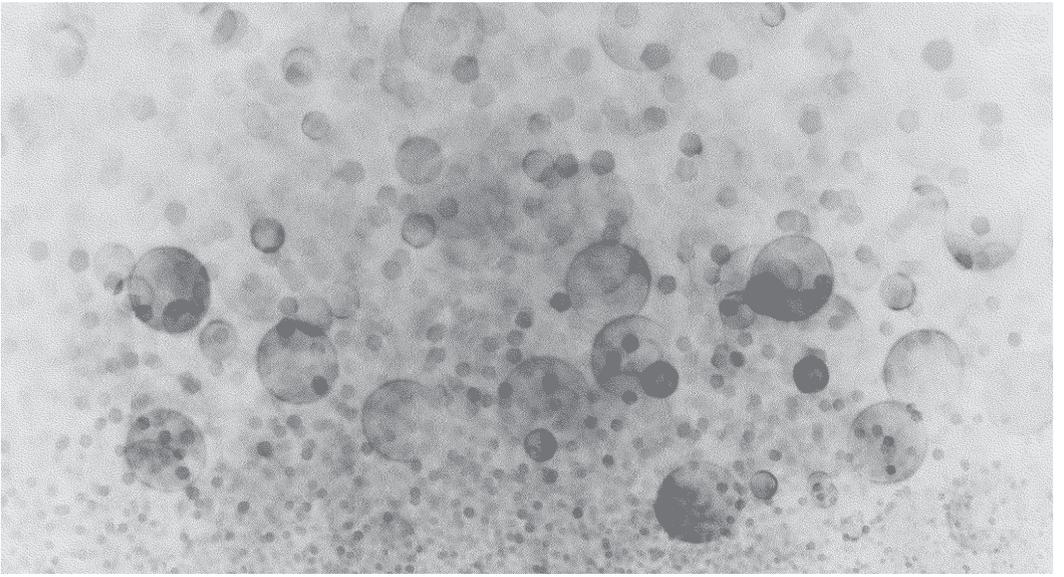
are you going to help it grow and improve if you are not willing to point your finger at yourself first? *Holding yourself accountable* and *refusing to fail* are key elements of successful school leadership.



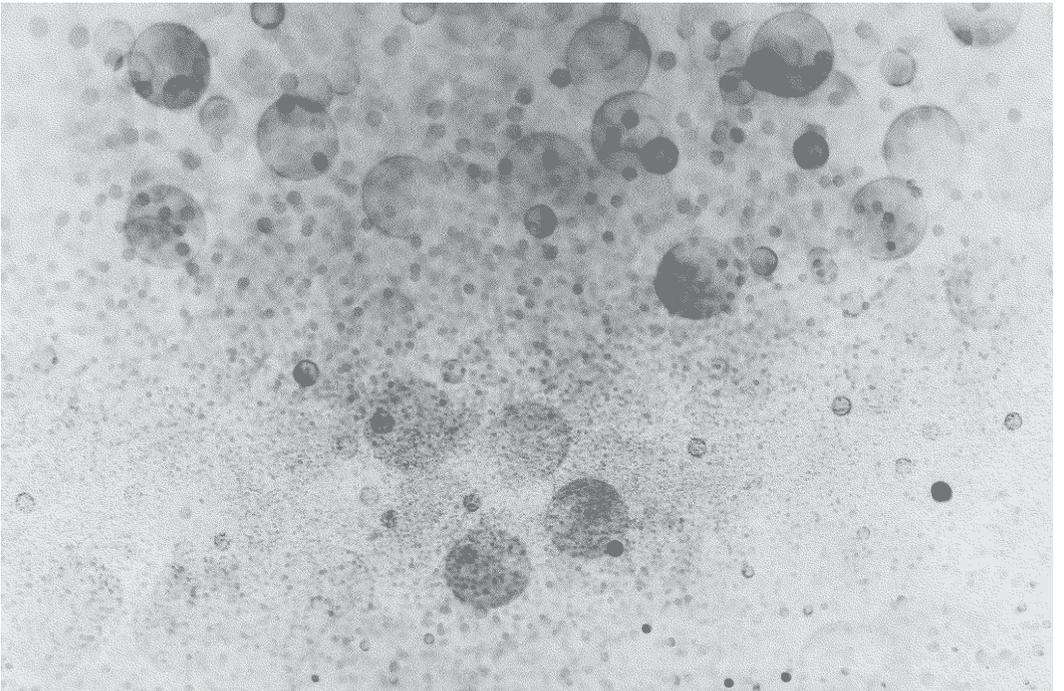
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR





A highly regarded urban public school educator in New Jersey for over 20 years, Baruti K. Kafele has distinguished himself both as a classroom teacher and as a school principal. As an elementary school teacher in East Orange, New Jersey, he was selected as the East Orange School District and Essex County Public Schools Teacher of the Year. As a principal, he led the transformation of four different schools, including Newark Tech, which went from being a low-performing school in need of improvement to being recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the best high schools in the United States.

Currently, Kafele is one of the most sought-after speakers on the topic of transforming the attitudes of at-risk student populations in North America. He is the author of six books on this topic, including two ASCD best-sellers, *Closing the Attitude Gap* and *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*. He is also the recipient of over 100 educational, professional, and community awards, including the National Alliance of Black School Educators Hall of Fame Award, the Milken National Educator Award, and the New Jersey Education Association Award for Excellence. Kafele can be reached via his website, www.principalkafele.com.