

“Teaching As Leadership”

Steven Farr

Kindle Notes: Dave Kraft

Distilled to their essence, our findings indicate that six general principles distinguish the actions of highly effective teachers from those who are merely solid or struggling—principles one would find embodied by any successful leader in any challenging context. These are teachers who:

1. Set big goals that are ambitious, measurable, and meaningful for their students.
2. Invest students and their families through a variety of strategies to work hard to reach those ambitious goals
3. Plan purposefully by focusing on where students are headed, how success will be defined, and what path to students’ growth is most efficient
4. Execute effectively by monitoring progress and adjusting course to ensure that every action contributes to student learning
5. Continuously increase effectiveness by reflecting critically on their progress, identifying root causes of problems, and implementing solutions.
6. Work relentlessly in light of their conviction that they have the power to work past obstacles for student learning.

Virtually any successful leader in any context tackles massive problems in this same way, starting with a mental picture of a new and better reality these teachers are in fact employing leadership techniques when they develop and communicate their vision of a different reality as a means of driving dramatic change. These teachers are telling us exactly what management and leadership experts say: “Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people.

The timeline and deadline inherent in setting a measurable goal bring urgency to you and your team’s efforts. Many great accomplishments in any sector of society began with an articulation of measurable outcomes.

As Jim Collins reminds us in his studies of effective for-profit and nonprofit organizations, “To throw our hands up and say, “But we cannot measure performance in the social sectors the way you can in a business” is simply lack of discipline. All indicators are flawed, whether qualitative or quantitative. Test scores are flawed, mammograms are flawed, crime data are flawed, customer service data are flawed, patient-outcome data are flawed.

What matters is not finding the perfect indicator, but settling upon a consistent and intelligent method of assessing your output results, and then tracking your trajectory with rigor. What do you mean by great performance? Have you established a baseline? Are you improving...If not, why not? How can you improve even faster toward your audacious goals? The best big goals are those that constituents instantly understand and that “reach out and grab them in the gut.

Highly effective teachers report that having the clear vision of victory down the road helps them keep all those daily challenges in perspective and keep working hard. Mr. Winchester believes that “90 percent of the value of the big goal is the motivating power of high expectations.”

The very best leaders understand that their key task is inspiring shared vision, not selling their own idiosyncratic view of the world.” Ms. Pierce realized that all the benefits of big goals are magnified when the goal is closely tied to students’ deepest aspirations: In the words of Kouzes and Posner about all successful leaders, “They liberate the vision that’s already in their constituents. They awaken dreams, breathe life into them, and arouse the belief that we can achieve something grand.”

- Effective big goals draw on three principles of strong leadership: an insistence on measurable outcomes, expecting the best of those around you, and informing your vision with the aspirations of your constituents.
- Big goals maximize student learning by aligning the effort of the teacher, students, and their families and by bringing urgency and focus to learning. Well-designed big goals can be inspiring and motivating to teachers and students.
- Effective big goals are measurable, ambitious, and meaningful to students’ lives.
- The core academic element of any big goal must be aligned with rigorous learning standards.
- Highly effective teachers develop their big goals by asking themselves several questions:
 - What measurable academic progress should my students achieve?
 - What measurable traits, mindsets, and skills will best serve my students?
 - What pathways to opportunity are in front of my students that should inform the big goal?
 - What student interests and motivations could shape the big goal? All too often, our students’ educational experiences are influenced by low expectations, failed efforts, and unsupported academic struggles. Other students hold the opposing view of intelligence: that it is malleable. From that perspective, “intelligence is not a fixed trait. Making the pace of progress clear encourages students to take ownership of their own learning.

Without fail, classrooms in which students are making dramatic academic achievement are ones where the teacher has created some form of “dashboard” for students—a concrete representation of students’ academic growth that lets them see their progress.

Highly effective teachers establish their objectives’ relevance to students’ lives, teach at a level of rigor that stretches but does not discourage students, and empower students with choice and responsibility in their own learning. You have to know what you want to accomplish and you have to see it in your head before you do it. Before taking any action, strong leaders define the ultimate result they want, make clear how they will know they have succeeded, and only then choose and design strategies to that end. Think of purposeful planning—for any type of plan, large or small—as comprising three sequential principles.

First, they develop a clear vision of success (as discussed with big goals) from which they can plan backward.

Second, they ask themselves, “How will I know that my students have reached that vision?” and translate their image of success into some form of assessment.

Third, after developing a vision and assessment, the strongest teachers design a plan by imagining themselves on that path to success, testing in their mind different strategies and anticipating different challenges to success. The old adage reminds us that in the best designs form follows function. In other words, all the methods and materials we use are shaped by a clear conception of the vision of desired results.

“In some ways, leaders live their lives backward,” explain Kouzes and Posner. “They see pictures in their mind’s eye of what the results will look like even before they’ve started their project, much as an architect draws a blueprint or an engineer builds a model. Their clear imagining of the future pulls them forward.” Highly effective teachers, like all other successful leaders, insist that their desired outcomes drive their choice and design of strategies.

Are your assessments aimed at students’ meaningful understanding rather than rote, superficial knowledge? Once you have a vision of success and know how you will determine you have reached that vision, you can begin developing a plan to reach it. Long-term plans make you constantly reassess where you are and where you’re headed so you can correct errors sooner rather than later. Planning always starts with looking at which skills each student needs to master to meet their goal and then looking at where they are now. Backward planning for each student between these two points—that’s what differentiation is. Only by having specified the desired results can we focus on the content, methods, and activities most likely to achieve those results.

All purposeful planning involves establishing a vision of success, developing a means of knowing you have reached success, and planning a path to that vision of success.

This approach is a form of backward planning—starting with one’s ultimate aims and then thinking about how to get there—that characterizes strong leadership in any context, in its most fundamental sense, execution is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it.” Teachers must be great communicators, strong systems and people managers, and excellent planners. With the most successful teachers, we see two actions that lead to a high level of task competency.

First, these teachers are constant learners.

Second, these teachers practice.

They practice the skills they use to serve their students. words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt: “But above all try something.” If you have planned well, the distance between that imagined reality and the actual reality will usually be small and manageable. These teachers define communication not as what is said but as what is understood—a direct manifestation of the general principle of insisting on an unvarnished view of one’s impact. During a lesson, these teachers are focused on what students are hearing and understanding rather than on themselves. This list, drawn from analysis of videos of highly effective teachers, is a list of characteristics of the most effective communicators you can think of in any sector. Strong communicators customarily:

- Use a positive and engaging tone
- Have expressive body language
- Employ varied and engaging vocal expressiveness
- Maintain constant eye contact with students/audience
- Purposefully repeat key ideas
- Make logical transitions
- Are enthusiastic about the subject matter (and audience understanding)
- Include elements of suspense, drama, and excitement in the exploration of new ideas
- Use accompanying visual aids and cues, such as graphic organizers, underlining, or using different colors on the board, to clarify key ideas and their relationship with one another

To me, one of the big mindset changes that I had when I started was that I thought teaching meant standing in front of the kids and then telling them to practice it. But really, the standing in front is not the most important part at all. The most important part is when they’re engaging with the material and I’m going around and circling and doing as much as I can to make sure they’re getting it.”

The first step to effectively asserting authority in the classroom is to ensure that students understand your expectations, the reasons behind them, and the consequences of not meeting them. Two of the biggest pitfalls for new teachers are failing to be explicit about expectations and then inconsistently following through on them.

These teachers simply make clear the expectations and consequence for not meeting them, provide positive reinforcement when students meet those expectations, and then uncompromisingly and methodically enforce expectations

Highly effective teachers seek colleagues who will give them frank and critical feedback. Define kindness in terms of learning rather than excuses. Kindness takes many forms, but making excuses for poor performance cannot be one of them. Rather than ask themselves, "What do teachers do?" they ask, "What must be accomplished to reach our ambitious goals?" The most effective teachers do not, however, take on all of those at once. They prioritize the problems, decisions, policies, and systems that have the most impact on their students' success.