

# Preface

In a recent burst of spring-cleaning, I came upon a classroom observation journal from my days as an elementary school principal. The entry that caught my eye was scribbled in response to this question a teacher had written on the chalkboard: *How do you know if you've had a good day?* I had written on that long-ago day, "It's been a good day when I've been to every classroom to visit and I've connected with every teacher on a personal or professional level."

Underneath this statement I had briefly noted four interactions with teachers thus far that day:

- Listened to an angry staff member rant about moving to a smaller home with her newly retired husband (his idea)
- Conferenced with a troubled teacher who refused to provide her telephone number for the teacher "phone tree" lest she become the recipient of crank calls
- Encouraged an exhausted new mother just back from maternity leave who was frazzled over the demands of juggling sleepless nights and hyperactive first graders
- Explained the meaning of *cooperative* in cooperative learning to a confused teacher

After the list I had jotted down this observation: "Being a principal is such a fluid job. I never feel as though I'm doing enough. There's always one more classroom to visit, one more discussion to hold. How can I keep them all motivated?"

Dealing productively with problem teachers has always been a challenge for principals, but the stakes are much higher now. In

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today's results-oriented educational world, even two ineffective teachers can cause your school and its students to be left behind. When accountability for achievement is high, all teachers must be as close to peak performers as possible. Your mission is to find creative, humane, supportive, timely, *and* tough ways to deal with teachers who, for whatever reasons, *aren't* producing.

**WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

I have written *How to Deal With Teachers Who Are Angry, Troubled, Exhausted, or Just Plain Confused* specifically for school principals who desire to become more skilled in dealing with difficult teachers toward the goal of maximizing student learning and achievement. Throughout this book, I speak frankly and practically to principals as a colleague and former principal. Having said that, however, the following audiences will also find the book to be helpful:

- Supervisors, mentors, or coaches whose goal is to encourage the principals with whom they work to become more confident and successful in their relationships with difficult teachers
- College and university teachers of courses in administration, supervision, or evaluation who wish to introduce prospective principals to the challenges of interacting positively with a diverse and difficult staff
- Central office administrators who are expected to deal personally with angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused teachers themselves, as well as supervise, coach, and mentor the principals in their districts
- Classroom teachers who are considering the principalship and wish to broaden their perspective regarding one of the most challenging aspects of moving from the classroom to the principalship—dealing with teachers who were once their colleagues and are now their challenges
- Department chairpersons who have supervision and evaluation responsibilities

- Classroom teachers who lead grade-level teams, serve on site councils, and chair study groups and task forces
- Literacy coaches who work with a broad range of teachers in efforts to raise student achievement
- Specialists (e.g., librarians; music, art, physical education, and reading teachers; psychologists; and special education resource teachers) who deal with large numbers of classroom teachers in their service and support roles

## SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE BOOK

*How to Deal With Teachers Who Are Angry, Troubled, Exhausted, or Just Plain Confused* contains the following special features:

- Assertive intervention scripts that demonstrate how to talk with troublesome teachers about their problems—explicitly, systematically, and supportively
- Sixty ways to energize, empower, encourage, and motivate teachers
- Answers to the most-often asked questions from practicing principals about dealing with dysfunctional teachers
- Roundtable discussions with highly effective principals on the “big ideas” of each chapter
- Actual case studies detailing how highly effective principals have dealt with difficult teachers
- Two resource sections—The Communicator’s A–Z Handbook, full of quips, quotes, and suggestions to improve your one-to-one interactions with trying teachers—and The Culture Builder’s Toolkit, packed with process exercises and assessment tools to help you create and nurture a positive school culture

## OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Chapter 1 describes seven habits of attitude and action that are essential for dealing effectively with dysfunctional teachers:

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1. Being an assertive administrator
2. Being a character builder
3. Being a communicator
4. Nurturing a positive school culture
5. Being a contributor
6. Conducting assertive interventions
7. Doing it today

Chapter 2 describes the critical attributes of an *assertive intervention* (AI), a tool for dealing explicitly, supportively, and systematically with difficult teachers.

Chapter 3 examines angry teachers and offers ways to deal specifically with these most challenging of employees. Whether teachers' angry feelings are justified or imagined, short-term or deep-seated, passive-aggressive or out of control, evident to everyone or focused on just one or two individuals, this chapter will help you find the courage you need to reduce, if not eliminate, teacher hostility.

Chapter 4 focuses on the troubled teacher—whether temporarily because of life's ups and downs or more seriously due to a mental disorder. The troubled teacher's problems are usually multifaceted and may take various forms in the classrooms and hallways of your school. Learning how to build trust, suggest options, and offer support without being patronizing or invasive is a tricky endeavor. This chapter will suggest some ways that have worked for highly effective principals around the country.

Chapter 5 describes strategies for managing relationships with teachers who are exhausted, stressed, or just plain burned out. To deal effectively with teachers in this category, principals need to pay special attention to their own physical and mental health. "In order to change the behavior of others, first look at your own behavior" is the big idea of this chapter.

Chapter 6 will help you deal with teachers who range from confused to incompetent. If you have too many marginal teachers

on your staff, you no doubt experience low achievement, inappropriate student behavior, disastrous parent-teacher relationships, and lack of collaboration among faculty members. This chapter provides suggestions for dealing with low-performing teachers as well as critical guidelines for keeping what you do within the confines of the contract and the limits of the law.

Chapter 7 suggests sixty ways to energize, empower, encourage, and motivate teachers. These ideas will help you deal positively with problem teachers, *and* they will encourage your star teachers to remain committed and productive.

As noted earlier, there are two resources at the end of the book that will make it a handy reference long after you finish reading it start to finish.

## A MATTER OF DEFINITION

I use the following terms throughout the book to refer to all of the teachers in the universe who are problematic in some way: *dysfunctional*, *troublesome*, *difficult*, *challenging*, and *tough*. Some of them also define the situation that you, the principal, are in when faced with their behavior. Take heart, however. As you gain expertise, you will quickly graduate from merely *dealing* with difficult teachers to *helping*, *facilitating*, *supporting*, *empowering*, *energizing*, *motivating*, and *leading* them.

Although I only refer to certified staff throughout the book, many of the suggested approaches and scripts are applicable to custodians, secretaries, lunchroom supervisors, instructional aides, and any other job category you employ and supervise in your school. An angry custodian or abusive lunchroom supervisor can impact the culture and effectiveness of a school as powerfully as a confused classroom teacher.

I use the terms *confront* and *confrontation* throughout the book. Although dictionary definitions of these terms sometimes include the concepts of defiance or antagonism, there is a third meaning that I wish to embrace exclusively: *acknowledging and meeting a problem teacher face to face with honesty, boldness, and confidence*. To confront teachers in the context of this book means

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making them aware in calm and forthright ways that you have observed their behaviors, are able to define them in detail, and are comfortable discussing them in rational ways. Furthermore, you are willing to lend support and resources if needed to address the problem, and you will not ignore further manifestations of the problem. Confrontations as described in the context of this book are never arrogant, hostile, or antagonistic.

Last, you may notice that only in rare instances do I use the singular form of the word *teacher*. This in no way implies that you have multiple faculty members in every category of difficult teachers. Rather, it enables me to avoid the clumsy repetition of the personal pronouns, *he* and *she*, making for smoother reading for you.

**A CAUTIONARY NOTE**

This book is not a legal document. It is intended to provide accurate information about subject matter. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher and the author are not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services. Specifically, the recommendations contained herein are guidelines only and not legal advice, and the publisher and the author do not warrant in any manner their suitability for any particular usage. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of an attorney or other competent professional, with knowledge of all laws pertaining to the reader and the jurisdiction, should be sought.

I am not implying that the recommendations of this book are the only methods or procedures for dealing with difficult teachers. The AI model is one of many tools you can use to deal with difficult teachers. Therefore, it is essential that you thoroughly review your district's evaluation procedures, negotiated contract, and policies before using any of the suggestions in this book.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Highly effective administrators from around the country contributed the case studies, anecdotes, and reflections you will find

throughout the book. I am grateful to each of them for their careful completion of a lengthy questionnaire and for the time they also gave for further follow-up conversations and e-mails in many cases. Their names are listed alphabetically here: Sandra Ahola, Jan Antrim, Corinne Archie-Edwards, Carol Blades, Lynn Blair-Thompson, Sue Braithwaite, Ron Collins, Dee Condon, Kathie Dobberteen, Laurence Fieber, Mark Frankel, Mary Kay Gallagher, Margaret Garcia-Dugan, Elsie Heller, C. J. Huff, Kathy Johnson, Shirley Johnson, Paula Kindrick-Hartsfield, Todd Lambert, Lola Malone, Nancy Moga, Phyllis O'Connell, Doug Pierson, Jim Ratledge, Kathy Schneiter, Craig Spiers, Cathie West, Dean Wharton, Todd White, Joseph Wyatt, and Lydia Zuidema. Where appropriate, I have cited their contributions in the book, but in many instances their input remains anonymous.

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Anne Lamott (1995) says that writing a book is like putting an octopus to bed (p. 94). I agree. Just when you think you have all of the arms tucked safely under the covers, one of them slips out and starts flapping. I am especially grateful to my copy editor, Marilyn Power Scott, who helped me to put this "octopus to bed." She is a gracious woman with a wonderful sense of humor who is also a dream of a copy editor. She improves every manuscript with a deft and subtle hand. To date, although we have never met in person, we have worked together on half a dozen books. It's never easy to submit to the discipline of copyediting, but Marilyn always makes it a lovely and growth-evoking experience. Thank you, Marilyn.

As always, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my husband and business partner, E. Raymond Adkins. Those readers who have attended my workshops and presentations know what a steady and supportive presence he is. His wisdom and common sense are the final arbiters of what goes into all of my books.