My parents have owned a sheet-metal fabricating company since I was 15. They ran a company with 100+ employees, so I was able to observe the importance of culture in a workplace. If people feel that they matter, they’ll work hard and do their best. I spent summers working in various parts of the company, from running the turret and the press brake to deburring parts and working quality control. In my role as the quality control manager, I had the opportunity to interact with every department in the shop. My job was to make sure that each part fit the required specifications. If a measurement was off, it was easy to adjust and run a new part.

Of course, I wasn’t always a welcome sight. If the other workers saw me coming, they either thought, “Great, it’s the boss’s son” or “There’s something wrong with the part I just made.” In most cases, it was probably a mix of both. But in those moments, I learned how to interact with people in a situation that was initially negative. I was the catcher of problems. After I worked to develop relationships with my coworkers, however, I found that they looked at me differently.
When I did identify problems, it was easier to shift the conversation from the negative to the positive, from the issue to the solution.

Those skills have certainly helped me as an educator—to an extent. I knew how to address challenging issues. What I soon realized, however, was that the “parts” we make in schools aren’t fabricated from metal and made using blueprints. Instead, our parts are young girls and boys, with their own experiences, thoughts, and challenges.

Being able to work with the workforce culture is one thing. Working on a culture for shaping and supporting students is something different. Put adults and students together and you have yet another culture. This doesn’t even take into consideration parents, community leaders, and members of the community. These interacting cultures can diminish or enhance the work we do. They can cause our improvement efforts to stagnate or accelerate. I would argue that understanding your culture and positioning it for success are among the most challenging—yet vital—pieces of becoming an instructional change agent. To see how part 1 of the book fits with the other keys of leadership, see figure P1.1.

**FIGURE P1.1** Drive School Culture
Part 1 expands your understanding of school culture and explains how this domain prepares you to be a successful instructional change agent. The moment you become leader of a school, you’re impacting the culture of that school. This happens whether you like it or not, whether you’re ready for it or not. Although it takes time to change the trajectory of school culture, what you think, what you say, and what you do are immediately contrasted with the current culture.

In chapter 1, I provide you with strategies for reflecting on your own passion. This includes the reasons you became a school leader. In chapter 2, I’ll show you how to understand your role in the culture, including ways to identify themes and trends in the existing culture. Although you may believe that you know about the culture of your school, chapter 3 reminds you that there are hidden cultures in every school, cultures or subcultures that you likely don’t know exist. With a bit of sleuthing, you’ll be able to gain some insight into these groups and their effects. Chapter 4 places emphasis on your students—after all, kids are the reason you’re in education in the first place. Finally, chapter 5 offers a strategic approach to applying everything you learned in the first four chapters in order to create a vision for your school. You’ll make this vision known to all stakeholders and use it to facilitate your decision-making process.
Congratulations! You’re joining the ranks of over 900,000 school principals across the United States—easily over a million across the world. That may seem like a lot of people, but given that there are more than 50 million students, there are relatively few adults with the ability to regularly impact school culture as school leaders can. But what does it mean to be an elementary, middle school, or high school administrator? How do we organize our time to ensure that we are efficient and effective? How do we become the instructional change agent whom our students, faculty, and community deserve?

Before you can answer these questions, you need to understand your school culture—which begins by understanding yourself. What type of educator are you? What makes you jump out of bed each morning, excited to be an administrator? Why are you willing to work the long hours, often after school, to benefit children who don’t live in your own house? We’ll answer these questions—and many more—as we examine three Ways to find and recognize your passion as an administrator.

Way 1

Ask, Why Am I Here?

Reflecting on how you became the educator you are today requires self-discovery, meaningful experiences, and an honest look at the defining moments in your life.
I vividly remember my first-grade classroom. My teacher was Mrs. Schwartz, and she was the best teacher ever. (She also grew up next door to my mom.) I remember that she played the guitar and sang songs like “Puff the Magic Dragon” and “I Want to Eat Apples and Bananas.” Math was individualized and self-paced. Although we now know that this approach doesn’t work for every student, it was great for me. I loved competing with my classmates and being the first one done. Still, what I remember most was how much Mrs. Schwartz loved teaching. It was then that I knew I wanted to be a teacher. For the rest of my school career, I watched how teachers taught me and my classmates. I saw who loved their job and who hated their job. I took note of the best, happiest, and most effective teachers.

**What?**

Way 1 is the most important Way in the entire book. With this Way, I ask you to reflect on how you became the educator you are today. This requires you to dig deep into a lifetime of memories and plot out the moments in your life that brought you to this time in your life. Record each of your milestones. My first was Mrs. Schwartz, but I had many others along the way, as you likely did. By spending time in reflection, you’ll slowly create the educational timeline that brings you to your current position as an administrator. Keep this timeline of milestones nearby for reference. These milestones tell the story of your passion for a career you love. They tell you why you’re here.

Next, I ask you to reflect on how you want people to remember you as an educator. When you’re finished with your role as a school leader—whether it’s at the end of this year (I hope not!) or many years from now—what do you want people to remember about you as an administrator? What is the legacy you plan to leave behind?

**Why?**

Why do I want you to spend time reflecting on why you became an administrator, besides the fact that I hope you all have a Mrs. Schwartz in your life? As a school leader, you’ll have difficult days. Sure, some
days will be great. But other days will be lousy. And these lousy days will make you question the career you’ve chosen.

In these moments, I want you to pull out your timeline of milestones. When you begin to question your decisions, it will keep you grounded. It will help on those really tough days when parents yell at you, students misbehave, and you need to write up a teacher for not having lesson plans (it happens, trust me). It’s for the moments when you need to re-center yourself and know that your passion is not lost—it’s just hidden behind the day-to-day challenges that come with being a school leader.

How?

Creating the milestones may sound easy, but the task can be daunting as you look at a blank sheet of paper or empty computer screen. Start by segmenting your page into time periods such as Birth to Five, Elementary School, Middle School, High School, College, Teaching, Your Legacy (and others). For an example of the chart, take a look at exhibit 1.1. (A blank reproducible version is available in the appendix.)

Reflect on each period listed. Record what you’re reminded of in those phases of life. Include any “ah-ha” moments or important learnings. In the Your Legacy row, write about how you want people to remember you as a school leader. This reflection is just as important as the remembrance of events from your past. Your future is determined by what you do today.

When we spend time reflecting on our own life, we discover that moments we haven’t thought about in years were in fact pivotal points in developing our own educational philosophy. Your response to certain teaching styles or your understanding of certain relationships often comes from experiences you had as a student or young professional. These moments become anchors for you as you begin your administration experience. They serve as a reminder that each child in your school is developing his or her own pivotal moments right now. The adults in your school—the teachers, counselors, and other leaders—may also be developing new milestones in their educational career journey. This is powerful to consider: You must be aware
EXHIBIT 1.1  My Educational Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth to Five</td>
<td>• Brother Aaron born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>• Brothers Andrew and Austin born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mrs. Schwartz first-grade class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moved to different school in fifth grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Started piano lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>• Mrs. Strickler—Battle of the Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• First stage performance, as Cowardly Lion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• My great-grandmother passed away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>• Played tennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mr. Smekens and editor of yearbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Church mission trip to West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/University</td>
<td>• President of my fraternity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engaged to Tiffanney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student teaching with Mrs. Gehrke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>• First year teaching (third grade) at Salamonie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student passed away in grade 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Paul changed my teaching beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• My son Chase was born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Co-developed PD model in district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Legacy</td>
<td>• All students matter and have value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School recognized as “Family Friendly”—one of the first in the state of Indiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Passion for reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that these moments are happening under your leadership each and every day.

These milestones that are etched in your memory may have occurred both intentionally or unexpectedly. During my first year of teaching, a student in another third-grade class passed away in a car accident. Up to that point, my career in education had not prepared me to deal with grief, sympathy, and the social and emotional learning
of students. It was on-the-job training. I’ll always remember the Monday after the accident, as well as the following weeks, as the entire school mourned the loss of a student and friend.

My passion for being an educator grew that year.

Then What?

After you’ve noted your milestones that helped build your passion for education, determine how you’ll display this information. Perhaps you’ll write it in a notebook that you keep on your desk. Or you’ll post it on the bulletin board in your office. Maybe you’ll take a picture of your chart and keep it on your phone. No matter how you decide to display these moments in your educational journey, do something to keep them close to you. You may feel that this is an odd strategy to start with, but you need to continuously remind yourself of what drives your educational makeup. The person you are today is made up of the experiences of yesterday. Write your story. Then tell your story.

What If?

Don’t despair if this task is challenging for you. One of the best parts of defining your passion is that it’s an evolving process. Continue to reflect on your journey and add to your story as you grow into your role as an educator.

If you found this process valuable, replicate it with your teaching staff. A shared opportunity to reflect on what makes us all passionate about learning strengthens the culture among the faculty.

For a summary of this Way, see checklist 1.1.

CHECKLIST 1.1  Ask, Why Am I Here?

- Chunk your life into time periods.
- Reflect and record milestones in each time period.
- Write about your legacy, too.
- Organize your milestones in a visual way.
- Keep it in an easily accessible location.
- Replicate task with your faculty if desired.
Take time to reflect on your leadership traits, your organizational methods, and your communication style.

If you’re ever lucky enough to receive an email from Josh Wenning, former high school principal and central office administrator and current executive director of the Region 8 Educational Services Center in Fort Wayne, Indiana, his signature line lists his top five leadership strengths. He determined these strengths using the leadership survey from the Gallup Group’s Clifton StrengthsFinder. This is an omnibus assessment based on Positive Psychology. The research from this study shows that by focusing on their strengths, people are happier, more fulfilled in their careers, and more productive. By stating his leadership strengths in his email signature line, Josh also spurs conversation with colleagues and builds common ground. But what’s most important is that Josh knows where his leadership gifts lie.

You should, too.

What?

Investing in who you are as a leader is one of the most important professional learning tasks you’ll ever do. There are many leadership inventories and surveys that you can take to better know your own personality and leadership traits. One is not necessarily better than another. With that said, I have personal favorites that I recommend, including the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator and the StrengthsFinder. I prefer these assessments over others due to the in-depth nature of the results and the tools that are available postassessment.

Whichever inventory(ies) you choose, pick just one or two to start this journey of self-discovery. Once you’ve taken the assessment(s), spend time reviewing the information and results. Use the internet to locate additional information and resources. Most of the assessments come with specific resources that allow you to develop a deeper understanding of your profile and knowledge base.
Why?

I’m sure none of you are surprised that self-discovery of your skills and traits is considered a way to enhance your own professional learning. But why should we spend so much time on self-discovery? Reflection is a high-yield strategy that allows us to strengthen our understanding, cement our learning, and move information from short- to long-term memory.

I spent 10 years as a baseball coach for our local recreational league. We would start every practice with a warm-up of throwing the baseball to one another. The players would always ask me why we spend time just throwing the ball back and forth. My answer? We build muscle memory through repetition. I wanted them to throw the baseball with ease. I didn’t want them figuring out how to throw short or far distances during a game, when a mistake could be costly. I wanted their throwing to be automatic.

The same goes with your leadership skills and traits. When it comes time to use your most important leadership skills, you want your muscle memory to kick in. You want those strengths to be automatic when you’re in the moment of being an instructional leader. That’s why we spend time understanding and investing in our strengths. As you can see in figure 1.1, I keep my leadership strengths in front of me every day by including them in my signature line, just as Josh does.

How?

Set aside a chunk of time without interruptions to take your chosen leadership assessment(s). As you respond to each statement, don’t...
overthink what the assessment is asking you; just answer as naturally as possible and move on to the next statement.

Once you have the results, spend some time in reflection. Respond to the results and record your feelings or thoughts. If possible, find another colleague to take the assessment with you. This increases accountability and provides you with someone with whom to discuss your results and next steps.

The following are a variety of assessment tools to consider:

- Gallup’s Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0
- MBTI Assessment
- Birkman Personality Analytics
- Integrative Enneagram Questionnaire

Then What?

After you have reviewed the results from your chosen leadership assessment(s), what should you do with the information? Whether or not you found someone to complete the assessment with you and act as a partner in your personal growth, you can still use your results to set your personal goals and develop your own plans. The 20-Day Personal Plan of Study resource shown in exhibit 1.2 can help you

EXHIBIT 1.2  20-Day Personal Plan of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Name:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Review the notes from your assessment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Spend time in analysis of the resources and strategies shared.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Think about the state of your current knowledge and consider your next steps.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Outline specific next steps to continue your learning.
5. Schedule a meeting with a colleague to review your learning.
6. Complete your plan.
7. Schedule a meeting with your colleague to discuss progress, questions, and next steps.

Analysis (What are your current successes and challenges?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>△</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Targets Using “I Can” Statements (What do you want to be able to do by the end of your plan of study based on the goals established?)

Action Plan (timeline, specific tasks, responsibility)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Target Date</th>
<th>Completed Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes in Your Journey:
focus on personal growth for the next month. You’ll find a reproducible version of this personal plan in the appendix.

With this plan, you identify three goals. You also reflect on the current successes and challenges in your life, whether professional or personal. The most important components are the “I Can” statements, which determine your target goals for your plan of study. How do you see yourself as a leader at the end of your 20 days? This is where you describe the “future you.”

The action plan helps you plan your work, and the additional notes are helpful for your thinking and learning. If you did find a partner to take the assessment with you, share your plan with her or him. And, most important, review this plan daily. By spending this time in reflection, you’re far more likely to accomplish your goals and improve your performance.

What If?

Every meaningful goal presents challenges. You’ll quickly see that using Way 2 to improve your role as an instructional leader takes time, practice, and energy. The most successful leaders, no matter how busy, spend time every week on professional growth.

Sue Gendron, the president of the International Center for Leadership in Education, has an overwhelming schedule, often filled with back-to-back meetings, high-pressure speaking engagements, and extensive travel. I once asked her, “How do you accomplish so much every day?” Her response: she needs only five hours of sleep. Wouldn’t that be nice! But I also believe that Sue has mastered the ability to efficiently organize her time. After revealing her sleep advantage, she shared the fact that she blocks out time on her calendar for important family tasks, and works to maximize each moment of the day.

The lesson? The phone calls, emails, reports, observations, and meetings will always be there. You must be the caretaker of your calendar. If you don’t take control of your calendar, the calendar will take control of you—bringing you further and further from your goals. Checklist 1.2 offers a quick summary of Decode Your Professional DNA.
CHECKLIST 1.2  Decode Your Professional DNA

☐ Select and take a variety of assessments.
☐ Reflect on the information gathered from the assessments.
☐ Identify trends in your data.
☐ Develop a 20-day personal action plan.
☐ Review the plan and reflect on your growth.
☐ Continue the process of professional growth.

**Develop Your Passion Dashboard**

Creating a dashboard of your passions keeps you focused, grounded, and intentional in the work you do as a school leader.

For six months, it seemed as though every time I started my car a warning light flashed on. Every time this happened, I looked up the issue in the manual and ended up taking my car into the dealership. After some work (and too much money), the issue would be fixed. Then, sure enough, within the next 7 to 10 days, another light would blink on. Although each light created angst and frustration, I would remind myself that I was fortunate to have a dashboard that made me aware of present and future problems—problems that could become catastrophic if not addressed. By paying attention to my dashboard, I could give that particular issue the attention it needed, resolve the issue, and move on with my life.

As Way 3 will demonstrate, your passion dashboard should do the same.

**What?**

The passion dashboard is exactly what it sounds like: a full-screen display that tracks your passions. This dashboard includes four or five tasks, goals, activities, or groups—personal or professional—that you’re extremely passionate about. These are the things that make you jump out of bed in the morning and keep you excited about life, even during
the most challenging times. The dashboard ensures that you’re constantly paying attention to these very important, self-identified items.

Let me give you an example. Early in my career, I took an interest in learning about how the brain processes and retains new information. As a teacher and principal, I found value in learning about how the brain works so that I could enable better classroom outcomes, and later be a better leader for my teachers and students. As I continued to read and learn, my passion for cognitive research grew. I wanted to know how the brain functioned in a variety of circumstances, such as when learning how to read, building relationships, experiencing poverty, and dealing with trauma. I knew that the more I learned about the brain and how it operates, the better I would be as a principal.

Somewhere along the way in my principalship, I was inundated with the day-to-day tasks of being an instructional leader. Not surprisingly, this passion for learning took a backseat. Several weeks passed before I even realized that I was neglecting my study of cognition and the human brain. Why did this happen? I was tired and frustrated. I felt as though I was trapped on the leadership treadmill, doing the same thing every day. Upon reflection, I realized that I’d become lost in the moments of being a principal and had forgotten my passion for learning. When I returned to this passion, it reenergized my enthusiasm for being a principal and an educational leader.

Why?

By identifying four or five areas about which you’re passionate and reflecting on how these areas impact your daily life, you’re determining your priorities. The passions you select for your passion dashboard bring a sense of equilibrium to you when you feel run down or overwhelmed. Although this may seem obvious, if we fail to take the time to articulate these areas of passion, to spell them out and acknowledge how they shape our lives, they can be left behind.

In addition, when we fail to prioritize those things in our lives that stimulate our passion, we lose focus on what’s most important to us. And when we lose focus on our personal passions, it becomes difficult to make decisions and prioritize all areas of life. Therefore, we must
invest in our passions. Doing so helps us optimize our strengths in all we do in life, both at work and at home.

**How?**

Developing your passion dashboard is simple. Start by generating a list of items, activities, or groups in your life that excite you. These items are components of your dashboard. After you create this list, determine which of the items or activities are most important to you. Remember, not everything on your list can be a priority. If they’re all a priority, then none of them truly are. Narrow your list to four or five. Then take each item or activity and flesh out why you’re passionate about it. Here are some of the questions you should use to help you explore each passion on your list:

1. How do I feel when I spend time in this area of passion?
2. How much time do I need to spend in this area daily? Weekly?
3. What does my life look like when I am spending time in this passion?
4. What happens when I don’t spend time in this area of passion?
5. How can I ensure that I spend adequate time with this area of passion?
6. How do I self-assess my progress in this area?

Exhibit 1.3 shows an example of how you can use these questions to better define and understand your passion.

**Then What?**

After you identify each item of your passion dashboard, display the dashboard somewhere for your reference. Keep in mind, our car dashboard is directly in front of us every time we get into our car. It’s meant to be in our face as a constant way to quickly assess how our car is functioning. The same is true for your passion dashboard. Create your dashboard, take a photo of it, and make the photo your background on your laptop or portable device. This is a surefire way to see your dashboard every day, or even multiple times during the
day. And take it from me, the more you see your passions, the more you’ll pursue them. The more you pursue them, the more they become cognitively hardwired habits. (See, all that reading on how the brain works paid off.)

Be sure to share your passion dashboard with family, friends, and colleagues. In fact, encourage them to replicate the process. When you let others see your passion dashboard, you’re signifying to them what’s important in your life. There are two clear benefits to this: they come to know you better, and they become stewards of your priorities.

What If?

As you continue to grow both personally and professionally, your passions change. This is natural. When you find that your passions are changing or fluctuating, modify your dashboard. You should regularly reflect on your passions, so that you can revise them as you continue to grow and to learn about yourself.

The more time you spend on self-development, the stronger you become at home and at work. The passions you have for work, for family, and for other interests in life become behaviors that you model...
to the people you lead at school. Your aim is for your faculty and your students to see your fuller identity, beyond your role as a school leader—to see you as a multidimensional person who cares about others and brings passion to every task or challenge. Modeling your own self-care and self-development directly impacts your school and its culture from the inside out. For a quick summary of Create Your Passion Dashboard, see checklist 1.3.

**CHECKLIST 1.3  Create Your Passion Dashboard**

- □ Create a list of items in your life about which you are passionate.
- □ Prioritize your list to the top four or five.
- □ Flesh out each passion by considering the questions listed in the “How?” section.
- □ Create the details of your dashboard for each and post somewhere that is visible.
- □ Share your dashboard with others to build accountability for keeping your passions part of your life!