

Conditions Worth Changing

This is a test. It does not claim to be high stakes or scientific, but take it all the same. Imagine that you are an educational leader, in either a teaching or an administrative position, and you are contemplating three different schools that must improve student achievement. To pass this test you'll have to choose the right course of action for each case school, but first you will have to decide what the problem is.

CASE 1.1 Mid-Balkans High School

Without exception, the teaching in the English department at Mid-Balkans is excellent. Student achievement scores have risen significantly in each of the last five years for all subgroups. The number of minority students successfully completing AP and college level courses in English has doubled in the last three years. The department is the poster child of reform for the Central Office, which regularly parades visitors through its classes. However, no other department produces such results, and all the positive attention to English has engendered resentment among faculty members. Stung by cynical comments about how they are “mollycoddlers” and “bleeding hearts,” half the English teachers say they are no longer willing to spend time arguing the merits of the strategies they use. They keep to their own wing unless there is a required school-wide meeting.

By contrast, mathematics achievement at MBHS reached an all-time low two years ago. The superintendent attributed the poor performance to weak departmental leadership, and she and the principal “restructured” the high school administration in response. They moved the former math department head to a district curriculum job and recruited Marla W, an assistant principal from Tech High with an outstanding math background. Charged with leading “a school-wide effort to improve mathematics achievement,” Ms. W quickly intro-

duced the same textbook series that Tech High had been successfully using and organized a series of voluntary workshops that were sparsely attended and much ridiculed. Failure rates in the 9th and 10th grade soared, and teachers blamed the new materials. By the end of the second year, most of the juniors who wanted to take calculus were being told they were ineligible because of their sophomore grades. In response, the Mid-Balkans principal diverted funds that were supposed to go to science textbooks and another assistant football coach to provide after-school test preparation and tutoring for math. That decision caused two newly hired science teachers to request transfers to Tech High. They will be leaving at the end of the year, as will Marla. She says she is “fed up with faculty resistance to any kind of change” and with the math department’s apparent hostility toward students who need even modest support or modification of instruction.

With more budget cuts likely, remaining department heads are lobbying for funds and trying to protect their programs from further inroads to support math. Marla’s two veteran colleagues report that they are hearing more complaints than usual and that staff morale is low. At a meeting on curriculum rigor, a new social studies teacher’s proposal to reinstate Economics as a way of beefing up program offerings was greeted with scorn by math department members. They pointed out that “kids who can’t pass Algebra II probably won’t get Economics either.” Although several English teachers told her she was right when they met her in the parking lot later, the social studies teacher said that she had learned her lesson and wouldn’t open her mouth again.

CASE 1.2 **Miraculous Middle School**

Thanks to the extraordinary work of teacher leaders and teacher teams, strong Central Office support, and a dedicated group of administrators, this once-threatened school has all but transformed itself over the last five years. Only the 8th grade is a hold-out from the “bad old days.” As 6th and 7th grade student performance has risen dramatically in all subjects, the drop-off in 8th grade results has become more obvious and acute. Both school and Central Office administration think the primary difference is the performance and capability of teams at the different grades: 6th and 7th grade teams collaborate effectively and have identified and eliminated a number of key obstacles to student learning. The faculty who teach 8th grade have never been able to act in concert on any significant instructional improvement. They have continued to do what they have always done even as students and curriculum requirements changed.

This year there were three openings in 8th grade. To “keep them from being infected by the predominant culture,” administration put all three newcomers into 8 Platinum. The beginners are struggling to

figure out the curriculum pacing and handle the disproportionate share of special needs students, but at least they're getting along well with one another. The other two "teams" are really loose collections of genuinely excellent teachers and difficult-to-work-with people who have, over time, intimidated others into giving them the working conditions and student loads that make their teaching life easy and predictable. No one really knows how anyone else's students do. The 8th grade experts cherish their autonomy and have thus adopted a live-and-let-live approach to colleagues. In fact, the 8 Silver and 8 Gold teams come together only in opposition to administrators' requests. Recently they were asked to collaborate and design new schedule configurations that would provide built-in opportunities for re-teaching any concept that 30 percent of their students had not mastered. That request provoked a scathing "open letter" to parents and the community authored by two of the self-appointed deans of the 8 Gold team. The letter claimed to represent many other faculty members and warned readers that the quality of their children's education was being sacrificed to meet the needs of a few "limited ability" students. Two of the most effective 8th grade teachers already provide such time; privately they disagree with colleagues, but neither was willing to speak up in a public meeting.

What do these two schools have in common? They are not really case studies in widespread mediocrity, i.e., places full of teachers whose performance is not good enough to get the job done and not bad enough to fire. Individual teachers and groups within these schools have been successful in helping their students overcome obstacles to achievement and make academic progress. We might, instead, describe Mid-Balkans and Miraculous Middle as places that have problems distributing learning and guaranteeing high-quality instruction across an entire school. The gains in understanding and performance accomplished by some members of the organization are not shared or used by others. The rate of improvement has stalled, and the degree of improvement is insufficient.

The students at Mid-Balkans and the 8th graders at Miraculous Middle need help. This is still a test. If you were one of the administrators or teacher leaders, what would you do? And why should you do it? For advanced credit, be prepared to consider the costs and benefits of each option below.

Option A: Get out of the way of the gifted teachers whenever possible. Celebrate and protect the exemplars of excellence—the kind of instructors you want for every child. Ignore the petty jealousies of others who do not have the passion or conviction to get the job done. Send members of the latter group to observe high performers and have high performers provide professional development for those who are not yet able to help their students meet important learning goals.

- Option B: Use formal tools and authority. Supervise, evaluate, or challenge individuals who are not getting the job done. Uphold the standards for adult collegiality and interaction by “writing up” those who don’t share ideas or behave professionally with others.
- Option C: Think and act positively. Concentrate on building morale and vision, on motivating everyone else to be as good as your best practitioners. Build the self-esteem of individual faculty who are showing promise and help them create their own initiatives so that they too will get resources and will feel less antagonistic and competitive towards the high flyers and successful departments or teams.
- Option D: Transfer or reassign troublemakers, loners, and folks who disrupt the harmony of the school. Encourage those who want to “do their own thing” to apply for specialist positions, find a school that will respect their individual talents and autonomy, or perhaps consider administration. Break up ineffective groups and/or lard them with skilled folks who are new to the building and do not buy into some of the old patterns of behavior.
- Option E: Focus on how the school is spreading learning about what helps students from one professional community to another. Determine why some groups have the conviction, competence, and resources to help all of their students make progress while others do not. Stop tolerating the malfunctioning groups. Start interventions that give them the message their non-performance is unacceptable. Determine what it will take to make the whole organization and all the professional communities within it, behave more intelligently and capably.

In some ways this looks like a real test. Certainly all of the situations are real; we simply borrowed them from people who have described their dilemmas to us. If we have been successful in “item design,” more than one option in A-D should attract you by its pragmatism or familiarity.

Then there is Option E. The different wording and strategic position gives it away to savvy test-takers; it’s clearly the answer on our minds. A few years ago, however, Option E might not have made our list. Over the last several hundred conversations, strategizing sessions, and visits to schools, we have come to understand that “fixing” a challenging individual whose teaching is mediocre or a team that is not getting the job done may be a critical short-term goal. But fixing one case doesn’t always help a leader address what is happening for large numbers of other children in the school. It won’t make the school or grade level group any more capable of helping children learn, and it won’t take on the nonproductive behaviors getting in the way of adult development for the rest of the faculty. Taking on cases one at a time is not guaranteed to make a dent in what really matters.

Equity and opportunity matter. Spreading the best of what we know and are able to do across an *entire* institution, not just a few teams, schools, departments, or single practitioners matters. If we care about all the learning of all the students at Mid-Balkans or the 8th graders at Miraculous, we need to create what Perkins (2003) calls “smart organizations,” places where all the adults “pool mental effort” as well as physical effort to make a difference for children.

Now, just for a moment, consider one more case: Edgeland Elementary where “everything is beautiful,” but the tests don’t know it or show it.

CASE 1.3 Edgeland Elementary School

Edgeland Elementary sits on a lovely plot of land in a once-solid family neighborhood whose population has changed dramatically over the last six years. Its principal, Marvin R, grew up in the city and knows everyone who’s anyone in both local politics and the school department. Marvin says Edgeland is like a “big, loving extended family; once you’re part of it you don’t need anyone else.” Many of his staff are sons and daughters of old (or new) friends; his assistant principal is a former student, his cousin is the guidance counselor, and his aunt runs Food Services. Staff stay for years; everyone knows everyone else’s personal business, and, until recently, everyone knew the students’ families and stories.

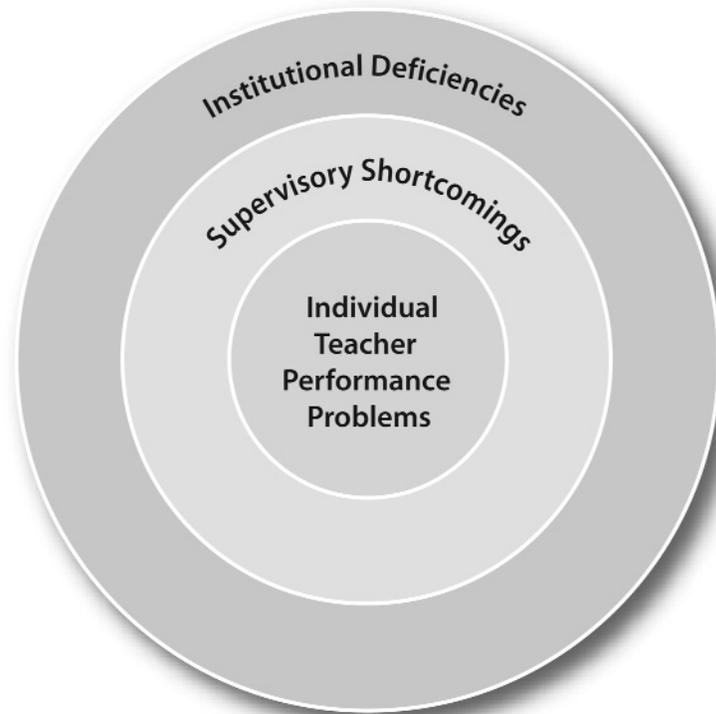
Because of his connections, Marvin can pick up the phone, call in a favor, and get almost anything done. Newly appointed principals, particularly if they have been hired from within the district, tend to see Marvin as an informal mentor. He puts himself out to welcome them, tell them the inside scoop and the way things run, and introduce them around to the various board and department heads in city hall. In return they support his positions with the “know-nothings and eggheads” in the district office. Marvin’s response to requests for change or new initiatives sets the tone for his staff and his mentees alike. He tends to support the status quo, which he believes has worked well for him. Staff learn, and teach newcomers, that it is best not to “make waves”; rarely does anyone bring up difficult topics.

For years Edgeland’s scores teetered at or just below state average. Even when other elementary schools in the district began to have scores noticeably above that average, Marvin was never worried. Kids were different now, he said. He declined invitations to see what others were doing across the district or to go to conferences. Because Marvin was pleasant and politically connected, district leadership left Edgeland alone. Then two years ago, student achievement scores in both literacy and mathematics went down precipitously; the school has been unable to make AYP since then. In response Marvin has initiated a whirlwind of requests and activities: he demanded that the Central Office find funds for new books and programs; he wanted extra special education staff, more testing of individual students,

more outside placements, and some big-name speakers to motivate his staff. He announced that his problem was not like anyone else's and that he was too busy to come to district meetings that were all theory and had nothing to do with his problem. Lately, he's always late to required events; he skips important grade level and curriculum meetings without apology or excuse. Other members of the administrative team are irritated and beginning to imitate him in (they say) self-defense.

So what does Edgeland have in common with our two earlier cases? True, it's another school in trouble. If you're hardhearted, you might say its troubles are its leader's own fault. Unlike our other two cases, however, we may need to look at a different starting place than the behavior of groups within the school. Edgeland's troubles, we think, can best be understood by looking at the institutional conditions that allowed it to become a mediocre performer and to stay that way long after other schools within the district had begun to change. Thus we might examine who got hired (and how), the process of induction, the belief systems that have governed decision-making and actions, and the role (or lack) of district leadership teams and of district expectations and culture.

FIGURE 1.1 Sources of mediocre teaching.



In *The Skillful Leader: Confronting Mediocre Teaching*, we suggested that the problem of mediocre instruction is a nested or multi-layered one whose sources are represented by Figure 1.1.

Deciding where to place blame or who should take ownership of the problem is not easy. Behind individual cases of second-rate instruction, for example, we could identify the supervisory shortcomings and the institutional norms, beliefs, and practices that had allowed those cases to exist. To take on cases of mediocre performance, we proposed a mixed approach: go after the unpromising practices and debilitating beliefs that support mediocrity at the institutional level and help supervisors learn how to address its varied and challenging individual faces in buildings and departments.

Keep that image of nested causes for mediocrity, but focus on the adult and organizational learning that ultimately affects the opportunities available for students. Consider our three cases. In each school, a few individual adults have successfully tackled and solved problems that were blocking students' achievement. Even more important, some groups of adults have shared knowledge, pored over data, experimented, and coached one another to achieve significant results. They now know what it is like to be part of a high-functioning professional community and how to collaborate when the next unfamiliar challenge appears. But the collaborative behavior of these groups and their new knowledge about improving student learning has not spread. It is as if there were impermeable barriers between one department and another, between one team and another, or between one school and the rest of the district. There is no significant transfer of practice.

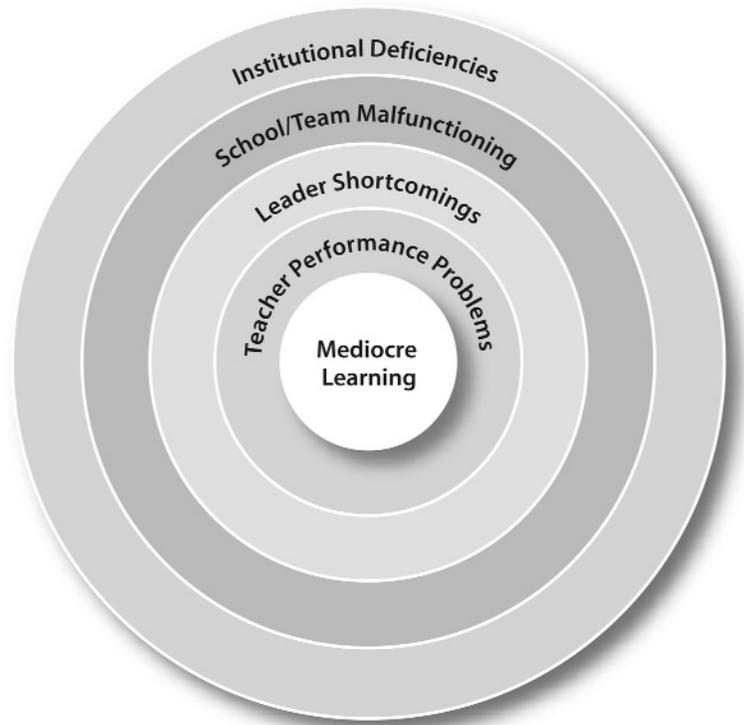
Mediocre teaching may be an individual problem. However, mediocre student and adult learning are team, department, or grade-level problems, school-wide problems, and district ones. Mediocre learning results when school districts do not provide the structural resources, the vision and tenacity, or the skill development necessary to help leaders confront poor performance. Mediocre learning results when adults in schools cannot or will not collaborate to tackle obstacles to achievement. It happens when people choose to organize their time and effort in service of their own comfort rather than students' needs and when adults who know better look the other way to preserve relationships, harmony, or the illusion of peace. Finally, learning is undermined or blocked when leaders and teachers resign themselves to surviving in environments made toxic by the inappropriate behavior of other adults.

Five key assumptions have shaped our thinking about conditions worth changing in schools and the ways in which we might help skillful leaders transform struggling schools or jump start those that are stuck:

1. Strong groups who commit to continuous improvement of practice in response to students' learning needs can affect both student achievement and the performance of individual teachers in their classrooms.
2. Even successful schools or school districts have great variation in the effectiveness of their component working groups. High-performing, accountable professional communities are the exception rather than the norm.
3. Good role models and programs for team development are rare in most districts.

4. Just as they need to tackle cases of sub-par teaching, leaders must know how to confront and seek improvement from malfunctioning groups.
5. Group problems are almost always caused by individuals, but the solutions are rarely found by confronting individuals alone. When a professional community malfunctions, it is the problem of that community collectively.

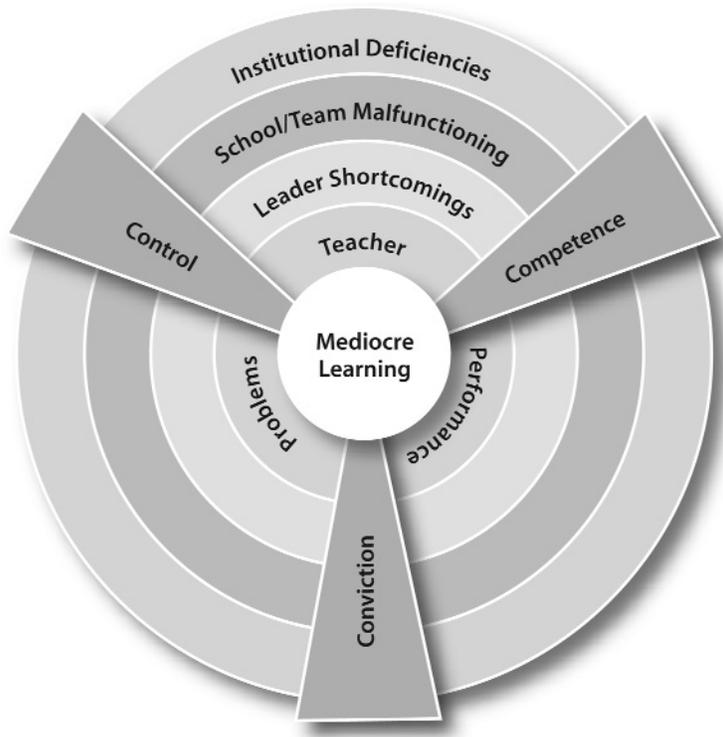
FIGURE 1.2 Group malfunction as a source of mediocrity.



Given these assumptions, confronting the conditions that undermine learning requires that we add a new circle to our nested sources of mediocrity. As Figure 1.2 illustrates, we must also examine the characteristics, behaviors, and competencies of groups of adults who work in schools.

To change practices that are not working and expand our understanding of those that are working, we need every teacher engaged in the push. We believe the effort requires the same multi-pronged approach that helped us confront mediocre teaching: the 3 C's of Conviction, Competence, and Control defined below and represented in Figure 1.3.

- Conviction: Holding and consistently acting on a set of beliefs or stances that move the school or institution closer to its mission of making sure children learn and achieve at high levels.
- Competence: Using a repertoire of skills and substantive knowledge about effective teamwork and adult interaction and

FIGURE 1.3 Confronting the sources of mediocrity.

using problem-solving skills to address student learning needs.

Control: Adequate structures, processes, and resources to support groups charged with improving student achievement and carrying out the mission of the school.

In the following chapters, we will explore the ways in which skillful leaders use these three capacities to break down invisible barriers and allow learning to spread.