I enjoy mowing my grass on Saturday mornings. I’m not sure why this is such a pleasurable experience for me, but it really and truly is something I look forward to doing. One of the things I enjoy most is the smell of the newly mowed grass; another is the feeling of accomplishment that comes with completing a project that allows you to admire the results of your labor instantly. Those of us who are educators never tire of experiences like this, experiences that provide even a small measure of instant gratification. Maybe this is because it seems as if we have to wait most of a lifetime to see the results of our efforts with children in classrooms.

Although I like smelling the newly mowed grass and admiring the results of my handiwork, perhaps the thing I like best about mowing my grass is the feeling of power I derive from mowing down all those thousands and thousands of blades of grass while gliding along effortlessly behind my almost new, Honda self-propelled mower. When I first
brought my Honda mower home from the store, my wife took one look at it and exclaimed, “Wow! It looks like you could drive it to town.” My wife doesn’t exaggerate—it’s an impressive mower!

Over the years, I have established a pattern for mowing my grass that suits me perfectly. I always begin by cutting all the odd-shaped, uneven areas around the edges of my yard first so that after a while, I’m left with a large circle of uncut grass in the middle of the yard. Then I go round and round the circle in a nice easy rhythm interrupted only by my stopping occasionally to empty the bulging grass bag. It’s downright peaceful!

As I cruise along effortlessly, watching the circle grow smaller and smaller with each completed circuit, I wear my genuine “Dale Earnhardt” earphones and listen to public radio.

There are a lot of good shows on PBS radio on Saturday mornings. There’s “Car Talk” and “Rabbit Ears Radio” and my favorite mowing show, “What Do You Know?” which sounds like “Whadda Ya Know?” when you hear it on the radio. “Whadda Ya Know?” is produced by Public Radio International and is broadcast out of Wisconsin. The host of the show is the clever and entertaining Michael Feldman. Michael always begins the show with a question for his live and listening radio audiences. “Whadda ya know?” he asks in a rather loud and demanding voice, to which the members of the studio audience (and all of us listening out there in radio land as well) reply in unison, “Not much!”

The show is a quiz show, and as it progresses, it becomes more and more evident that the contestants on the show don’t, in fact, know very much.

At least they don’t know very much about the questions that Michael Feldman has for them. The questions on the show are designed to cross up the contestants and make them look foolish by asking about silly and often obscure facts gleaned from nonsensical categories, such as “Things you should have learned in school had you been paying attention.” The
producers of “Whadda Ya Know?” acknowledge that the questions are a little ridiculous with a disclaimer that advises the listeners to get their own shows if they don’t like the questions used on “Whadda Ya Know?”

Twenty-five years ago, had you asked me “Whadda ya know?” I would have responded differently to the question than I would now. Like many young people (including the two sons that grew up in my house over the past two decades), I thought I knew just about everything in this world that I needed to know. It was during this early period of “self-enlightenment” that I was asked by my state school administrators association to deliver a series of workshops at a number of locations around the state. The purpose of the workshops was to help building-level school administrators improve their skills as instructional leaders. Now, I must tell you that I feel strongly about the importance of instructional leadership in schools. But I must also tell you that I have a problem with discussing this topic in public. It seems that I have a predisposition to preach on any topic about which I care deeply—unfortunately, that includes a fairly broad range of topics, because I am a very caring person. At any rate, if I’m not extremely vigilant, suddenly, and without warning, I can find myself preaching rather than teaching.

Apparently, that’s exactly what happened to me when I delivered my series of workshops on instructional leadership those many years ago. I was sitting in my office one day after the series had concluded, congratulating myself on the fine job I had done, when I received a piece of correspondence in the mail.

The message was simple and straightforward. The message read, “It’s better to know some of the questions than all the answers!” Below this simple message was the inscription, “James Thurber (1894–1961).” At first I was flattered; I thought James Thurber had sent me the message. But almost instantly, reality set in, and I realized that James couldn’t have sent me the message, because he had been dead for quite some time before someone used his words of wisdom to pull
me down off of my pedestal and plunk me firmly back down on the ground where I belonged. I had been so busy telling everyone the answers to becoming an instructional leader that I had forgotten the most essential questions.

To this day, I have no idea who sent me that simple but powerful message. At first, I was offended at the implied put-down, but after I’d thought about it for awhile, I was grateful. Whoever that thoughtful and caring person was who sent me the message, I want to thank him or her for reminding me that I should be focusing more on the essential questions in my life and not worrying so much about the answers. For although the answers to life’s most important questions may vary with the times, with a particular set of circumstances that exists at a given time, or with the persons who are doing the asking or being asked the questions, the essential questions remain eternal.

In her wonderful book, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret J. Wheatley (1992) says this about the uncertain nature of life and the futility of wanting someone else to give us the answers to life’s most important questions:

I haven’t stopped wanting someone, somewhere to return with the right answers. But I know that my hopes are old, based on a different universe. In this new world, you and I make it up as we go along, not because we lack expertise or planning skills, but because that is the nature of reality. Reality changes shape and meaning because of our activity. And it is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants. It can’t happen without us and nobody can do it for us. (p. 151)

I believe (and I don’t mean to be preaching here) that the very best leaders spend a great deal more time pondering the important questions in life than they do dispensing the “correct” answers. It’s not the right or even the responsibility of a leader always to have the right answers to life’s most
important questions. It is, however, the responsibility of a leader to acknowledge that these crucial questions exist for every organization and every individual within an organization. Realizing the transitory nature of human experiences in organizations, it is the responsibility of a leader to work faithfully with others in the organization to seek the answers to the questions most relevant to them at a particular time under a prevailing set of circumstances. Ultimately, struggling together with the critical questions will do more to define a successful organization than all the answers in the world. In my view, asking the critical questions in the right ways at the appropriate times helps to define one who is caring enough to lead. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, we will have plenty of opportunities to ponder important questions together. As we embark on our mutual journey, I want to prime you with a single question: Whadda ya know?