

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction—Dimensions of Challenging Conversations

WHAT IS A CHALLENGING CONVERSATION?

CHALLENGING—ADJECTIVE

1. Requiring full use of your abilities or resources; "ambitious schedule"; "performed the most *challenging* task without a mistake."
2. Stimulating interest or thought; "a *challenging* hypothesis"; "a thought-provoking book."
3. Disturbingly provocative; "an intriguing smile."

(<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/challenging>)

In simplest terms a challenging conversation is defined as an interaction between two or more parties characterized by

- elevated emotional intensity,
- differing viewpoints, and
- perceived high stakes for at least one of the parties.

(Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002)

2 The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations

“Emotional intensity” can refer to the discomfort, anxiety, or even fear that one or more of the parties experience as they engage in the conversation. Emotional intensity might also refer to the anticipation and excitement that comes from having intense, meaningful professional dialogue with others. It is these edgy conversations that can promote and sustain school improvement. “Differing viewpoints” establishes the idea that challenging conversations are usually about differences between two people and how each person responds to his differing situations. “Perceived high stakes” means that at least one of the parties in a challenging conversation believes that the outcome is very important to him.

It is important to note that the dictionary definition of *challenging* used above highlights two aspects of challenging conversations that are central to this book. First, challenging conversations demand the best intentions, skills, and process knowledge that school leaders can demonstrate to be effectively managed. Second, there is a positive element to challenging conversations because it is through challenging conversations that the school leader is able to negotiate sustained school improvement. To move forward, organizations such as schools need to talk well (and listen even better!).

In this chapter I will explore the dimensions of challenging conversations that are the basis of this book. I will explore the core concepts that inform the approach taken in this book toward being effective in meeting challenges. As school leaders it is impossible to experience all conversations, despite the demands of others, as high-stakes events. There are times when it is hard to match the intensity of the other person in a conversation. Hence I will consider how the experience of challenging conversations may differ for different people at different times and how that can affect the practice of school leaders. It is not always necessary to have a challenging conversation, so I will make a case for having or not having challenging conversations. Finally I will consider the value of challenging conversations in a collaborative school community that has as its central goal sustained school improvement.

CHAT, CHALLENGE, OR CRISIS?

Principal Fernandez has spoken to the parents of Germain Brown on more than one occasion about his marks and generally how Germain

is progressing in Mr. Bennett's class. Earlier in the year when everyone was adjusting to new routines, it was fairly easy to make acceptable suggestions to the family for improvement in the class. But now that the first report has gone out, it is clear that Germain is not doing as well as he has in the past. Principal Fernandez knows Germain well and acknowledges that he is not doing well this year. The principal also knows that Mr. Bennett can be difficult with everyone on staff and has a reputation among students as being inflexible, demanding, and inaccessible.

Principal Fernandez had spoken to Mr. Bennett, briefly, earlier in the year about some classroom issues. That conversation was not well received, although it did seem to calm some of the comments from parents at that time. But now that the reports are out, several other families have expressed their concerns about Mr. Bennett's class. Principal Fernandez understands that this is now a situation that demands his attention and he must speak again in more detail with Mr. Bennett.

Will this be a chat, a challenge, or a crisis?

Your response might be, “that depends.” Whether a situation is challenging can depend on a number of factors, some personal and others circumstantial. In the following sections we will explore a number of aspects of challenging conversations.

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS— SOURCES OF CHALLENGE

Challenging conversations arise from three major sources. Each may demand different approaches and take different degrees of skill and commitment to resolve.

Resource-Based Challenges

“When the watering hole shrinks, the animals look at each other differently.” Simply, in a finite world there are times when you gain and times when you lose. Sorting this out is the source of many challenging conversations. Given that there are often defined limitations and objective standards involved in this kind of conversation, they can be relatively easy to resolve. With creativity and

skill, two parties can even get more than they expected from the situation. An example of this kind of conversation would occur when a school leader and her superior discuss new funding for projects at the school. While the school leader may have many great plans, at the end of the day any new initiatives will be controlled by finite resources. In the case of Principal Fernandez and Mr. Bennett it may turn out that Mr. Bennett feels that his classes are too large to meet the needs of his students. Class sizes often must clear standards set by policy and are difficult to adjust for one teacher.

Needs-Based Challenges

This kind of conversation can be much more challenging to address. Sometimes the parties are much more reluctant to acknowledge personal emotional needs in themselves and others. The emotional component can be fraught with peril. It takes time, excellent interpersonal skills, and trust for the parties to open up about their real interests and needs—both substantive and emotional. Resolutions are also not so easily prescribed in these situations. There are fewer objective standards to meet. Also, it happens that even when substantive elements of a conversation are resolved or at least seem to be resolved, there can be lingering emotional aspects that remain unresolved and problematic for the future. An example of this kind of conversation occurs when the school leader provides evaluative feedback to a staff member. While the staff member needs to hear the details of the assessment, he also needs to feel respected and supported throughout the process. It is essential in such cases that school leaders clearly communicate professional respect and dignity along with any specific professional concerns. The effective school leader balances the need for a sound, professional relationship with the need to communicate observed data. Perhaps Mr. Bennett feels that he is doing his best yet receives little support or acknowledgment from his school leadership.

Values-Based Challenges

Sometimes two people simply hold strongly differing views, and each is not likely prepared to give his up easily. Religion and politics come to mind, as do differing professional philosophies. But other

areas that involve personal morality could also apply. Some would suggest that these kinds of challenges are impossible to really resolve. The best that can come from a conversation is an understanding of respective positions, interests, and needs and an agreement to agree to disagree. As might be expected, this kind of challenging conversation demands commitment from all parties, time, superb interpersonal skills, and significant trust to support ongoing collaboration. An example of this kind of challenge occurs when the school leader and a staff member can afford to disagree on a noncrucial aspect of school life. The challenging conversation is less about agreement or consensus than it is about reaching a mutual understanding that supports ongoing improvement in the school. Could it be that when all is said and done, Principal Fernandez has expectations for Mr. Bennett's classroom that Mr. Bennett does not agree with and, more important, would find very difficult to negotiate away in a conversation even with the principal?

FACTORS THAT DETERMINE A CHALLENGE

By now you may have sensed that Principal Fernandez's situation with Mr. Bennett is no great concern and simply requires some quiet time and a good talk. It is just one of those challenges that bedevil any school community, and it is easy to clarify the situation with the teacher, develop a plan, and move forward. Maybe you have recoiled in despair, sense that this situation with Mr. Bennett is cataclysmic, and have no idea how to move forward and have a better class situation for Germain and his classmates.

It is clear that the same situation can provoke a range of responses from different people. To further complicate the situation, what may be challenging one day is approached with ease on another day. What is one day a pleasant chat can become a challenging conversation on another day, and on our worst day a crisis erupts. Consider these factors that affect whether a situation could be challenging for the school leader in light of the situation between Principal Fernandez and Mr. Bennett:

- **General experience in meeting challenges.** Success breeds success! There is little doubt that approaching a challenging situation with competence and confidence based on a history

of positive experiences helps school leaders greatly. Principal Fernandez in our scenario hopefully has enjoyed a history of positive interactions with faculty in other schools in the past and can anticipate a similar experience with Mr. Bennett. Likewise, if Mr. Bennett has a history of positive interaction with school leaders then he will likely be more receptive to the comments of Principal Fernandez.

- **Past history between the parties.** Two people who enjoy a good relationship and a past history of successfully working through challenges usually can continue to have success in their ongoing conversations. You could say that they have accrued social currency with each other that will come into play at especially difficult moments. We are more inclined to give ground and excuse faults in relationships characterized by good faith, mutual trust, and a history of successful conversations. In this case it seems that Principal Fernandez will have to work hard at developing social currency with Mr. Bennett.
- **Issues related to school hierarchy.** Despite all efforts to the contrary, there are some people who adopt an ideological position that basically places school leaders in another camp from other school staff. It is an us-and-them mentality that inhibits sincere, open communication because of the perceived roles played by the respective parties. Is Mr. Bennett possibly one of these ideologues?
- **Interpersonal skills of parties.** While good intentions go a long way in supporting success in the face of challenges, serious skill deficits in one or both parties can hamper a conversation. Mr. Bennett, it seems, will seriously challenge the best skills that Principal Fernandez can muster.
- **Time and place.** Good conversations take time and a quiet place without distractions. They are poorly done on the fly. If an appropriate time and place are not available, then it is probably best to acknowledge the need to talk and arrange a better time and place. An interruption of a staff room conversation is not the best time and place to initiate what may be a challenging conversation. It is best for Principal Fernandez to arrange for this conversation to happen privately and at an opportune moment for both parties. This will increase safety for both parties to clearly express their needs and make positive plans.

- **Emotional intensity.** While it is understood that challenging conversations can excite passions, too much anger or upset of one person or both can compromise a conversation seriously. Hopefully Principal Fernandez can initiate a conversation and set a tone that constrains any emotional intensity within manageable emotional limits that allow the conversation to proceed and improve the situation for the students.

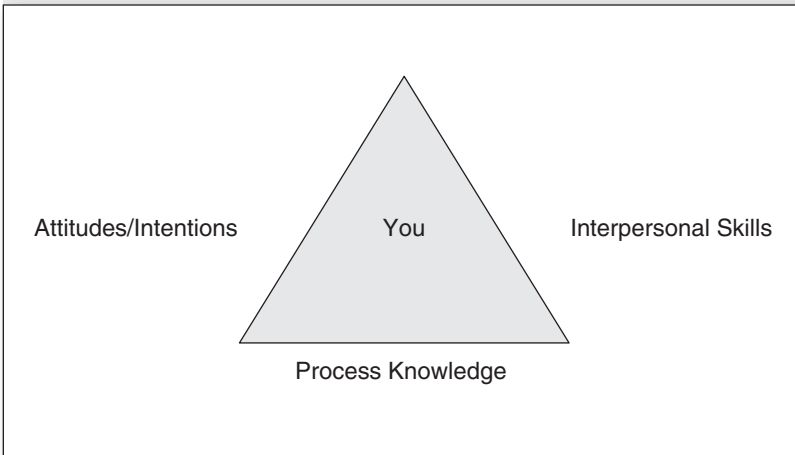
CRISIS OR CHALLENGE?

Challenging conversations should not be confused with moments of crisis. If emotions are running so high that a school leader feels unsafe, physically or emotionally, then a different set of priorities must take over. As mentioned in the Preface, the goal in a challenging conversation is to seek resolution, mutual understanding, or a consensus about what is happening between two parties. In a crisis the goal is to shut down the situation as quickly and safely as possible. Being confronted with someone who is clearly out of control and potentially dangerous demands a different set of skills and intervention strategies. If we or others are out of control and personal safety is compromised, challenging conversations should not occur. Perhaps later, when emotions are stabilized, can the conversation, still challenging no doubt, move forward. Principal Fernandez will do best by arranging a quiet moment when emotions are in check, privacy is ensured, and the focus can be on achieving understanding and resolution.

YOU, YOUR COMMUNITY, AND CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

Success in meeting the challenge in your conversations within the context of your school experience begins with *you*: your personal attributes, your personal history, your intentions, your experiences—all those aspects of you that act as filters for the world around you. For example, much of what occurs between Principal Fernandez and Mr. Bennett will depend on their past experience as educators and the expectations that were formed as a result of their experiences. Take a moment to consider Figure 1.1. In terms of challenging conversations, you bring three key elements to each situation.

Figure 1.1 Personal Elements



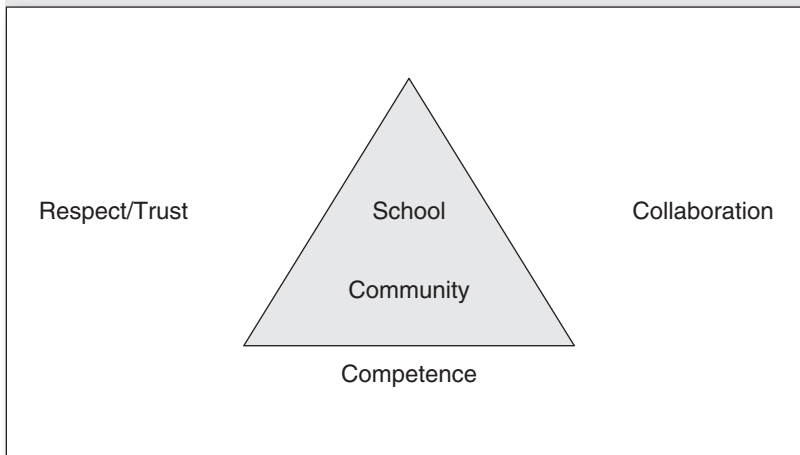
To each challenging situation, the school leader brings the following:

- **Her personal attitudes that inform her life view.** This might also be viewed as the habits of mind that she brings to each situation or the filters through which she experiences events. This would also include the intentions that she brings to each conversation. If her intentions are positive and she really wants to talk, then the end result is often positive even if the process is inefficient and difficult. Conversely, those who approach conversations with a negative mindset and no great commitment to talking, let alone resolving an issue often reap negative responses despite whatever great skills and knowledge they may possess. The importance of positive intentions cannot be overemphasized. But keep in mind that the road to hell is said to be paved with good intentions, especially if those intentions are not expressed clearly. Our good intentions must be supported by excellent interpersonal skills and an effective process for communication.
- **Her interpersonal skills.** The school leader's ability to listen well, speak directly and assertively, and provide accurate and useful feedback to others can only support her positive intentions and enhance her conversations.

- **Her process knowledge.** The school leader's best conversations will be based on a process that gives her confidence that she knows where she is and where she is going. Challenging conversations then cease to be random, often frustrating, if not outright frightening events. The school leader is in control and can often predict the response of others. The process recommended in this book will be outlined in detail in Chapter 2.

In turn, these personal elements are ideally played out in a school community that is characterized by the three key community elements illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 School Community Elements



It is easier to have challenging conversations where mutual respect characterizes all interactions, where collaboration is the norm, and where competence at both interpersonal skills and other professional skills is well developed and valued by all community members. The school leader who is skilled in conversations and is dedicated to positive outcomes for everyone will have a profound effect on the tone of the school community and its ability to meet the challenges inherent in the change process. Patterson et al. (2002), in *Crucial Conversations*, stress that success in challenging

conversations depends on making it safe for all to talk. Ideally the school leader and the community work together so that everyone can talk safely about the things that matter most in making real change and sustaining school improvement.

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS—CORE CONCEPTS

Let's consider the following scenario to explore some of the core concepts in challenging conversations.

Fun Fair Discord

Sandy, the newly appointed principal of Sunnylea School, heads to the staff room supply cupboard to refresh the coffee supplies in the main office. As she enters the staff room she hears Bert: "I've had enough. I am not staying late another night and working on the weekend at the Fun Fair just so this new principal can look good. If she thinks this is such a great idea let her run it." As Sandy turns into the room she sees other staff nodding in agreement. Upon her arrival their discomfort is palpable. Everyone waits to see what Sandy might say.

Sandy believed that she had established an easy working relationship with her staff. She thought that the Fun Fair, a Sunnylea tradition, was well in hand and that the faculty members were unanimous in their support and enthusiasm. Clearly she had misjudged the situation, and it is obvious that further conversations, starting with one with Bert, are needed. The ability of the school leader to address these kinds of situations and initiate productive conversations is at the core of school improvement.

While Sandy's initial conversation may be with Bert, it certainly will not be the only conversation required. Other staff members in the room at Sandy's entry are undoubtedly keen to see what transpires next, for sure they will speak with other staff not present, and so on. Sandy has entered, whether she realizes it or not, into a high-stakes situation where her next moves will be scrutinized and judged widely and with varying intensity. Sandy's reputation and viability in this school community could be compromised.

Core Concept—Process Counts!

School leaders are often judged by staff, students, and community as much on how they address the challenging conversations that arise daily as on the specific content of the conversations. Handling a conversation with sensitivity, transparency, professionalism, and sincerity will enhance the viability and credibility of the school leader and will greatly enhance trusting relationships within the school community. It is the basis of effective school leadership and the basis for a safe, collaborative school culture that supports sustained school improvement. Martine Lewis (2009, p. 18) is clear about the value of developing trusting relationships in schools:

The quality and strength of human relationships between the school leadership and the teaching faculty make a significant difference. Trust is embedded in our relationships. For that reason the cultivation of trust by principals is central to school improvement. Principals clearly play a central role in determining both the overall levels of trust and the specific expectations within a school. It is apparent that leaders, who are able to build and foster trust, create an improved school environment.

We build trust and authentic relationships as much by what we do as by what we say. In a nutshell—Process counts!

At this point it remains unclear what exactly is bothering Bert, and until Sandy explores the situation with him she will not necessarily be clear about what specifically is troubling him. Indeed, there might be a conflict inherent in the positions that Sandy and Bert hold about the Fun Fair, but it is also quite possible that with sensitive exploration they will discover that they actually agree more than they disagree. Process, how their conversation unfolds, could determine whether their situation is a healthy disagreement that supports sustained school improvement or something much more difficult and destructive.

While the future of the Fun Fair and its effectiveness is a key issue here and one that wants some resolution between the principal and the staff, it is also important to understand that the conversation between Bert and Sandy allows opportunity for them to deepen and

strengthen their professional relationship in the interest of future school projects. In this respect, their conversation is at the core of collaborative school improvement.

Core Concept—Listen for Meaning!

Listening well costs us little and forms the base of effectively responding to challenging conversations.

Ideally, when Bert and Sandy meet, their encounter will be focused on a dialogue that includes sincere and effective listening as well as clearly expressing their respective ideas. Effective conversations depend on the dynamic of listening and speaking shared between the parties. They depend on authentic dialogue. That said, listening is not the same as agreeing with someone. It is easy to understand that when someone feels well listened to, they could believe that the listener actually agrees with their ideas. This really isn't the case though. For example, the conversation might go as follows:

Sandy: You seemed quite upset in the staff room about the upcoming Fun Fair. Can you tell me a bit about what the Fun Fair means to you?

[Bert explains his viewpoint while Sandy listens intently, asks for clarification, and summarizes his points accurately.]

Sandy: I appreciate your honesty, Bert. I can't say that I share all of your points, but I do agree with you that . . .

Sandy can go on at this point building on their agreements and inserting some of her own points into the conversation. Bert feels listened to, but Sandy reserves the right to disagree. It is okay to disagree if you are prepared to actively listen to opposing viewpoints.

It is liberating to think that when we listen well, it is not the same as agreeing with someone. We don't have to agree—just listen! Active listening is also not problem solving, interviewing, counseling, or explaining. Active listening simply helps others to talk and the listener to get valuable information that could inform his

viewpoint and decisions. We will explore this essential skill further in Chapter 3—Listening for Meaning.

Core Concept—Be Prepared!

Some conversations are ambushes; some are planned; anticipated conversations are best. Be prepared!

Under pressure, school leaders may not access their best skills and may find themselves reacting to a situation rather than responding effectively. Even in situations wherein school leaders initiate a conversation, they need to be prepared to respond well in the conversation. How can we be best prepared? For the most part we can anticipate challenging conversations before they arrive. The characters involved, the topic, or both will lead us to anticipation and preparation. In the case of Principal Fernandez, he would do well to anticipate a challenging conversation with Mr. Bennett. In true ambushes the framework and critical path outlined in the next chapter become our refuge and the place we go at the first sign of challenge. While Sandy may be surprised by and not have anticipated what she hears in the staff room, she now has the opportunity to initiate a dialogue with Bert and others at some point that could bolster her standing in the community and produce a wonderful school community event. It all depends on what she does next—react badly immediately or respond thoughtfully later.

In a perfect world we would plan the challenging conversations that arise. In reality they often arise as unanticipated events that can feel like ambushes. The effective school leader is ready to respond either way.

Core Concept—Have a Script!

Challenging conversations proceed best when at least one of the parties has a script based on a sense of what the desired outcomes might be and how best to get there. If one party, ideally the school leader, has a script, then he can bring the other party inside the script and avoid the pitfalls involved in trying to wade through a random event.

Sandy will need all the skill she can muster in interpersonal communication to make the best of her dialogue with Bert. Aside from using the basics of effective communication, Sandy will do well to conduct their conversation within a framework, or script, that increases the chances that both she and Bert will have their interests and needs heard. *Script*, as it is used in this book, should not be confused with some devious effort to manipulate others. *Script* refers to a process that allows each party to express his or her interests and needs within a safe framework that will assist each party to meet the identified needs as well as possible. In Chapter 2 we will explore in detail some ways of responding to challenging conversations that are based on a framework and a process or script.

POWER AND INFLUENCE

Power and influence also play integral roles in the process of responding to challenging conversations. As principal, Sandy holds considerable power in her interaction with Bert. She has the personal power that accrues from working well in the past with the staff. Sandy also enjoys a prominent position in the school and community and derives authority from that position as sanctioned by the school and state.

Bert is not exactly helpless in the face of Sandy's authority. He is a respected teacher-leader and exerts considerable influence on the faculty from that position. Bert is well connected on the faculty; hence he has considerable influence on how things happen in the school community. While Bert's position is not necessarily supported by law, Sandy would disregard a person of Bert's considerable influence at her own peril as a school leader. The wise school leader balances power and influence carefully.

Power and influence are not always as evenly distributed as in the Sandy/Bert scenario. Principals enjoy considerable positional power and are always conscious of their position and careful in how they allow that to affect their interactions with others in the school community. Where the power balance is unequal there is the temptation to usurp the conversation and force the dominant viewpoint. This may resolve the conversation, likely at the expense of the relationship between the parties.

WHY HAVE CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS— SOME GOOD REASONS TO TALK

It is not hard to come up with many reasons not to proceed with a challenging conversation. Why should we move forward into a situation that is often high stakes and at the very least uncomfortable? Here are a few good reasons for the school leader to initiate challenging conversations:

- **To establish a base for a collaborative school culture and sustained school improvement.** The school leader who proceeds with sensitivity and professionalism on a consistent basis contributes immensely to the relational trust in the school community. This will increase the collaborative capacity of the school community. As well, this will contribute to the development of a framework for ongoing school improvement initiatives.
- **To provide effective school leadership.** School leaders by definition lead the school program and are responsible and accountable for most elements of a school community. This includes having hard conversations wherein they communicate clearly their expectations and requirements. School leaders set the standard to be met.
- **To model and demonstrate appropriate behavior.** There is an old saying that “who you are speaks so loudly that I can’t hear what you are saying.” It does no good for us to talk about the behaviors that we expect in our school communities if we don’t consistently demonstrate those expectations in our daily interactions, especially when those interactions may be challenging. Simply, “Walk the talk!”
- **To live with one’s self.** On a personal level, it is important for most school leaders to feel that they have done the best they can do each day through thick and thin. This is hard to experience if they know that they have avoided, on purpose, dealing with situations that ought to be addressed.
- **Because the alternatives are untenable.** School leaders can lead school communities based on safe dialogue on challenging topics that holds meaning for the school community and, by doing so, sustain school improvement initiatives. Or they can avoid challenging conversations and lose the opportunity

for meaningful change and sustained school improvement at the expense of their own professional reputations. At the end of the day, is there any real choice?

WHY WE AVOID CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

All brave talk aside, it is not surprising that many school leaders find a wide range of reasons not to have the conversations that are required. In reality it can be quite easy to rationalize why a conversation can be avoided. Jennifer Abrams (2009) has explored eighteen reasons why challenging conversations might be avoided by the school leader. In summary, here are several key reasons:

- **Fear.** Quite simply, having a conversation may compromise personal safety. On a less dramatic note, people fear damaging a relationship. They may fear the unknown because they cannot see where the challenging conversation might lead them. They may also fear their own incompetence and lack of confidence in this area—can I really have that conversation well?—and ultimately fear failure itself. A school leader may also fear the effects of a challenging conversation as they ripple through the school community and even further afield. How will others perceive what has happened?
- **Fatigue.** It takes psychic energy to persevere through a challenging conversation. Sometimes it is just too much to ask. Fatigue can be experienced as simple physical fatigue: there are times after a long day and a longer school term that the school leader is just not up for more challenges. And it can also be the kind of fatigue that comes from having had one too many challenging conversations with the same person—you can't rouse yourself for yet another round with this person. In the end the school leader may believe that a challenging conversation may just be too much trouble and not worth it.
- **Misinterpretation.** It is easy to convince yourself that it is never the right time for a challenging conversation. Similarly, it is easy to misinterpret the nature of a relationship and

convince yourself that it is either too delicate or not worthy of such a potentially damaging conversation. It is easy too to misinterpret the intentions of the other party and make assumptions that, if not checked out, can only cause further harm. This is especially true in the absence of excellent conversations when it is easier to attribute motivations and make assumptions about other people. It is also easy to misinterpret the effect of a conversation on a community.

- **Personal.** Our personal evolution and history render us vulnerable to a number of issues that impede challenging conversations. We may lack self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and process knowledge that could make a challenging conversation difficult and perhaps unsuccessful for us. We may convince ourselves that we lack the background information required to confidently move forward. It may be better to wait until we know more and can understand better. Challenging conversations often make for uncomfortable moments, and many of us are not ready for this discomfort.

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS AND A COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

We argued that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement was helping educators develop their capacity to function as professional learning communities. We called for schools in which teachers worked together in collaborative teams that engaged in collective inquiry on the big questions of teaching and learning. DuFour and Eaker (1998)

What we know about collaborative group endeavors such as professional learning communities is that well-managed conversations are an integral component of sustained school improvement. The ability to address and resolve controversy is at the core of effective collaborative organizational effort (Garmston & Wellman, 2009). Conversely, the inability to address efficiently and effectively the inevitable differences that arise in any organization can impede its progress or worse—destroy the organization completely.

REFLECTION

Think of an important relationship in your life. Can you imagine that relationship without differences and at times outright conflict? Can you imagine not having the occasional challenging conversation?

Not likely.

The best relationships and organizations thrive on differences well resolved and can gain energy from challenges and conflicts. But this is the case only in organizations where participants have learned to address conflict and challenges in a positive way and where these inevitable events are viewed as a source of power and energy. The effective school leader understands this important fact and strives to both model and practice positive and effective skills for addressing challenges and conflicts. Organizations that are led well and have developed these skills achieve a level of collaboration that dysfunctional organizations can only dream about. The key remains, though, the effective, collaborative school leader who manages challenging conversations well.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

- School leaders bring three core personal elements to a challenging conversation: their attitude and intentions, their interpersonal skills, and their knowledge of processes for meeting the demands of challenging conversations.
- Challenging conversations are most easily addressed in a school community characterized by respect, collaboration, and competence.
- School leaders are often judged by staff, students, and community on how they manage the challenging conversations that arise daily. One's skill in meeting these challenges can make or break a reputation. One's credibility and effectiveness are at stake.
- Dealing well with challenging conversations enhances trust in a school community and forms the basis of a collaborative school culture. It allows an organization to grow and prosper by providing a safe place to have the conversations that promote improvement.

- Challenging conversations are or could be conflicts, but they are not always conflicts. Effective conversation management is essential to capitalize on the energy inherent in a conflict and preventing damaging conflicts.
- Resolution of an issue by the conclusion of a conversation is not the sole focus; maintaining positive and progressive relationships is as important.
- Some conversations are ambushes; some are planned; anticipated conversations are best. Not all conversations are challenging for everyone. Responding effectively to challenging conversations is better than reacting poorly.
- Conversations are challenging to different people at different times. They are characterized by high-stakes goals, differing opinions, and heightened emotional intensity. Challenging conversations are more than a pleasant chat but less than a crisis moment.
- There are good reasons to have challenging conversations, and there are reasons why school leaders may avoid challenging conversations.

Now that we have considered some dimensions of challenging conversations, in Chapter 2 a framework and a process will be introduced that allow us to engage in challenging conversations successfully.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS

If you are reading this book as part of a study group, the following questions will initiate some interesting discussion:

1. In your role as a school leader, describe situations that arise that are more challenging than others.
2. In your school practice, what are the characteristics of people or times that you find challenging? Discuss your list with a colleague.
3. Consider your school community—explain how respect, collaboration, and competence are demonstrated.

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(Continued)

4. Describe a situation in which you managed a challenging conversation well.
5. Describe a time that you avoided a challenging conversation. What would you do differently if you had a chance?

CASE STUDY PRACTICE

We considered the situation of the Fun Fair with Sandy and Bert. Now it's your turn. Consider the following case study and develop a response to the following questions:

1. Which issues or concerns would you choose to address?
2. Which steps would you take in managing this conversation? Outline your goals and the actions you would take to meet those goals.

In the Resources section of the book some suggestions for addressing this scenario will be provided.

The Principal and the Bully

Principal Singh must return a call to the mother of Stacey. Stacey's mother is very upset because she believes that her child is being relentlessly bullied by other students and that the teacher and the school have done "nothing." This is the first time that the principal has heard about this bullying from the student, the teacher, or the parent.

YOUR PERSONAL CASE STUDY

At this point you have an opportunity to describe a challenging conversation that you have had recently. At the conclusion of subsequent chapters you will have the opportunity to reflect on how the content of the chapter may affect your interpretation of your conversation and how you might approach a similar situation differently in the future. The following page contains a template for organizing your description.

YOUR PERSONAL CASE STUDY

Describe the situation (who, what, when, where):

Barriers I must address:

Desired outcome:

Reflections—At the conclusion of each chapter you will have an opportunity to consider how the material in the chapter may affect your approach to your personal case study.