When people make a fundamental choice to be true to what is highest in them, or when they make a choice to fulfill a purpose in their life, they can easily accomplish many changes that seemed impossible or improbable in the past.

—Robert Fritz

One fundamental choice is the primary influence on all other choices; every day you can choose consciously to move consistently, persistently, and boldly in the direction of your dreams.

—David McNally & Karl Speak

My assumptions: We shape our future and the future of the organizations we serve through the fundamental choices we make and the values and purposes we select. Clearly defined fundamental choices, values, and purposes organize our activities, keep us on track, and sustain our efforts. They also are filters through which we can consider the desirability of our intentions and beliefs.
Few individuals become teachers who do not possess a healthy dose of idealism about making the world a better place through education. And teachers who become administrators often do so because they want to have an even larger effect on the lives of young people. Over time, however, educators may have lost touch with the passion their values and purposes initially infused into their professional lives, or their experiences have led them to doubt the possibility of achieving such lofty purposes.

Clarity regarding our values and purpose is an important means of reclaiming a sense of direction, power, and energy. Creating a succinct statement of your life purpose and a list of values requires a period of reflection, but it can usually be done in an hour or less with periodic updating and will serve as a reference point for all your activities. In addition, the ability to succinctly express our values and purposes in conversations often empowers others to do the same. Such honest exchange of views can have a significant effect on a school’s culture and the learning and performance of staff members and students.

Like professional purposes and values, “fundamental choices” guide our actions. They express our deepest aspirations, possess a tremendous power to shape and sustain high performance, provide a filter for planning one’s activities, and sustain motivation during difficult times.

“A fundamental choice,” Robert Fritz (1989) writes, “is a choice in which you commit yourself to a basic life orientation or a basic state of being” (p. 188). Examples include being the predominant creative force in your life, being true to what is highest within you, and being healthy and free. Primary choices, Fritz says, are those we make about the major results we wish to create, and secondary choices are the steps we take toward achieving those results. Primary choices are often called results, goals, or objectives; secondary choices are strategies or action plans.
Fundamental choices, Fritz says (1989), provide the foundation for primary and secondary choices. “When people make a fundamental choice to be true to what is highest in them, or when they make a choice to fulfill a purpose in their life, they can easily accomplish many changes that seemed impossible or improbable in the past” (p. 189).

On the other hand, school leaders sometimes make fundamental, primary, and secondary choices that fuel “slow death spirals.” For instance, principals may decide, consciously or unconsciously, that, no matter what, they will avoid conflicts with their supervisors or teachers. Because well-managed conflicts are important in decision making related to complex, important issues about which educators hold strong opinions, such disagreements are unlikely to be aired and resolved when leaders avoid such conflict.

Educational leaders sometimes can also make fundamental choices that lead to deep changes in themselves and the organizations in which they work, which lead to significant improvements in student learning. A superintendent, for example, who has made a strong, public commitment to all students having a competent, caring teacher will approach all relevant decisions with a frame of reference formed by that commitment.

The power of fundamental choices can be harnessed to motivate and sustain change. Robert Quinn (2000) describes the power of fundamental choices this way: “The individuals, groups, teams, and organizations will not change until they can identify and embrace their potential, that is, really grasp what they are capable of achieving. This will not happen until one person, somewhere, makes a fundamental choice and begins to demonstrate a new way of being. This will result in new actions, words, and commitment” (p. 94).

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We make the most lasting and vivid impression when people witness us being true to our beliefs, staying in alignment with who and what we really are.

—David McNally & Karl Speak

To be fully engaged, we must be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused and spiritually aligned with a purpose beyond our immediate self-interest.

—Jim Loehr & Tony Schwartz

How different our lives are when we really know what is deeply important to us, and, keeping that picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and do what really matters.

—Stephen Covey
This occurs, Quinn (2000) contends, because our enthusiasm and commitment are contagious. “People around us are moved in ways that are subtle but powerful. We become living symbols of a new vision. We send out new signals to everyone around us, and if we are in an organization, our very presence disrupts old routines. . . . A new dialogue is born and the culture in which we are participating begins to change” (p. 113).

EXAMINE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Write your assumptions regarding the importance of clarifying your purposes, values, and fundamental choices, stating them as succinctly and powerfully as possible. For instance, you may believe that “People have so little say over their actions that it’s a waste of time trying to figure out our purposes and values.” Share your assumptions with colleagues in the spirit of dialogue.

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DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Define in writing the fundamental choices you want to guide your life (for instance, living each day as a creative act). In addition, write a succinct statement of your life’s purpose. Begin with the phrase “My life’s purpose is to. . . .” Do the same with your professional purpose. List several of your most important professional values. Make a second list of your life values if they are different. Share your
statements and lists with others and be prepared to revise what you have written based on the discussion.

ENGAGE IN NEXT ACTION THINKING

Specify actions you will take based on your fundamental choices, values, or purposes, and by what date you will take those actions.

REFERENCES
