

# HIGH-PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & PROGRAM OVERVIEW

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

*Instructional leaders belong in classrooms. But how can we make time to visit classrooms, and what specific actions actually lead to improvement?*

One of the biggest barriers to more consistently spending time in classrooms is time pressure—overwhelming workloads and frequent interruptions make it difficult for school leaders to develop a consistent habit of visiting classrooms and talking with teachers.

But an equally pressing issue is what to do during and after classroom visits to have a positive impact on student learning. Studies by Vanderbilt and Stanford researchers Jason Grissom, Susanna Loeb, and their colleagues have found a somewhat muddled relationship between principal instructional leadership activity and improved student learning outcomes. The typical classroom walkthrough, with its focus on data collection and feedback to teachers, has been found to have a neutral or even negative impact on student learning.

The High-Performance Instructional Leadership Challenge is based on a two-pronged theory of action:

- Instructional leaders are most effective at leading improvements in student learning when they make decisions based on firsthand knowledge of what is happening in classrooms; and
- The best way to improve teaching is through evidence-rich conversations linked to a shared instructional framework.

The Challenge is a professional learning experience designed to help school administrators put this theory into practice.

### **Leadership As Decision-Making**

Making decisions is one of the key functions of school leadership—both for individuals in formal leadership roles, such as administrators, and for

groups such as committees and councils vested with shared decision-making authority.

While decisional authority may be important, it's impossible to make wise decisions without good information. In the Toyota Production System—world-renowned for its track record of quality and employee engagement—managers at all levels are expected to leave the comfort of their offices on a regular basis and visit the front lines where the work is being done. Without this firsthand knowledge—based on direct observation and conversations with employees—Toyota's leaders would be unable to make the right decisions.

In education, the same is true. Principals who know what their teachers and students need can make better operational, instructional, and professional development decisions—but only if they invest time and effort in visiting classrooms and talking with teachers about their work.

### **Conversation vs. Feedback**

Talking with teachers is one of the most powerful improvement activities leaders can engage in—both because it informs their leadership decisions, and because it improves teachers' instructional decision-making.

However, these conversations should not be seen primarily as opportunities for feedback. The idea that teachers need suggestions from their supervisors in order to improve is one of the most pervasive misconceptions in our profession. Though we may take for granted the idea that feedback is valuable and even essential, consider the context:

- Administrators often have less experience—and certainly less grade- and subject-specific experience—than the teachers they are supervising
- Typical classroom walkthroughs are based on very little information—just a few minutes of observation, usually designed around narrow data-collection goals
- The power dynamics between administrators and teachers create an incentive for teachers

to either comply with or resist feedback, rather than engage in conversations that lead to learning for both parties

- Feedback is often based on the administrator's ad-hoc intuitions about what could have been done differently, without taking into consideration what the teacher has already done or considered; and most critically,
- Feedback is often unrelated to the teacher's goals for the lesson, the teacher's goals for professional growth, or a shared instructional framework

Ultimately, when feedback is a one-way transfer of expertise from observer to teacher, it limits the opportunity for instructional leaders to continue to grow. Our greatest resource for professional growth is the teachers we supervise, who can challenge us to think more deeply about teaching and learning, and can push us beyond our personal experience in the classroom.

These conversations are best begun with an evidence-based discussion of what actually happened in the lesson, because feedback is fundamentally about returning information to its source for re-processing. When teachers are engaged in respectful, evidence-based conversations, their decision-making improves, and they have the opportunity to seek help in addressing any learning barriers they have identified.

The High-Performance Instructional Leadership Challenge is designed around the idea that conversations with teachers—based on a shared instructional framework and firsthand evidence of what took place in the classroom—are the best means of facilitating instructional improvement.

But none of this matters if leaders simply can't make time for visiting classrooms or talking with teachers.

### **Making Time and Forming Habits**

The reality is that most administrators spend very little time in classrooms—on average, fewer than ten minutes per day. Heavy workloads, high volumes of email, frequent interruptions and emergencies, and non-classroom supervisory duties combine to make it difficult to dedicate time to classroom visits and follow-up conversations.

If administrators are to spend substantially more time in classrooms, simply trying harder or setting a goal won't be enough. To devote dramatically more time to instructional leadership, we need systems.

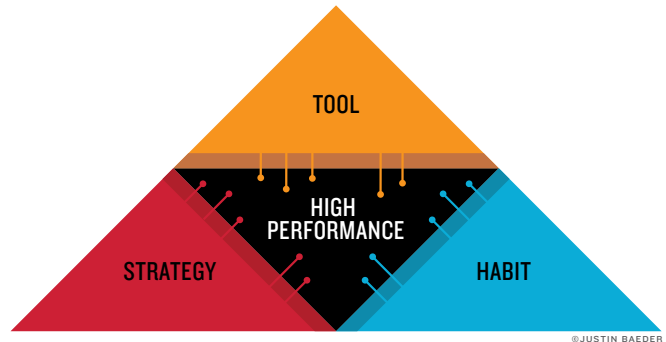
Such systems need three components:

- Sound strategy, to ensure that leaders' efforts

are achieving their intended results

- Powerful tools to increase efficiency, and
- Disciplined habits to create consistency over time

In the Challenge, we call this combination the High Performance Triangle:



In the High-Performance Instructional Leadership Challenge 1-Day Intensive, participants learn how to develop the systems they need to carve out time for classroom visits and powerful conversations with teachers.

If you are interested in bringing the Challenge to your organization, please contact my office at 1-800-861-5172 for rates and availability.

Sincerely,

Justin Baeder  
Director, The Principal Center



# SAMPLE AGENDA

## CUSTOMIZABLE FOR YOUR GROUP

### Morning Agenda

#### *Part I: The High-Performance Instructional Leadership Model*

- What Is High-Performance Instructional Leadership?
- Two Critical Habits for High-Performance Instructional Leaders
- A New Approach to Classroom Visits
- Related Instructional Leadership, Supervision, & Walkthrough Models
- Your First Two Cycles of Visits

#### *Part II: High Performance Habits for Instructional Leaders*

- Making Time to Visit Classrooms
- Get Current: Keeping Your Inboxes Under Control
- Mission Control: Using An Electronic Task App
- Snooze It Or Lose It: Just-In-Time Organization
- Leadership, Simplified: Minimizing Decision Fatigue with Habits

### Afternoon Agenda

#### *Part III: High-Impact Instructional Conversations*

- Beyond Data and the Feedback Sandwich
- Evidence-Based Questions and Conversations
- Your Shared Instructional Framework
- Impact Through Conversation
- The Toughest Conversations

#### *Part IV: Mastering High-Performance Classroom Observations*

- Preparing for Your 3rd Visitation Cycle
- Building Your Feedback Repertoire
- Structuring Your Feedback with Templates
- From Individual Visits to Formal Evaluations
- Opening The Door to New Models of Professional Development
- Distributed Leadership and Improvement Science
- Additional Tools and Resources

The High-Performance Instructional Leadership Challenge 1-Day Intensive may be a good fit for:

- State principals' associations
- Regional education service centers
- Leadership conferences seeking to offer full-day pre-conference
- School districts with 20 or more administrators, including central office leaders

The 1-Day Intensive can be customized to meet the needs of your group, including the specific instructional framework and evaluation tools you use. For more information, including rates and availability, contact The Principal Center at 1-800-861-5172 or [info@principalcenter.com](mailto:info@principalcenter.com)

