Preface

What capacity do we need as leaders to demonstrate authenticity and build credibility and trust? One of the most critical is our ability and willingness to engage in challenging, difficult, sensitive—in a word, courageous— conversations. . . . Open, authentic, truthful dialogue, in an atmosphere of trust and respect, are the key ingredients that make meaningful change possible.

—Ontario Ministry of Education (2009)

Our work, our relationships, and our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time.

—Scott (2004)

Courageous conversations, fierce conversations (Scott, 2004), crucial conversations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002), difficult conversations (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), hard conversations (Abrams, 2009), and the term that we will use in this book, *challenging conversations*—however they are described, the ability of school leaders to manage well the challenging conversations in their daily lives is a core leadership capacity. In managing conversations well, school leaders provide an accessible model of best practices and establish a clear standard for interpersonal interaction for others in the school community to follow. Further, school leaders who manage challenging conversations well enhance their personal credibility and viability within the school community. As noted by Susan Scott,

For a leader, there is no trivial comment. Something you might not even remember saying may have had a devastating impact on

someone looking to you for guidance and approval. By the same token, something you said years ago may have encouraged and inspired someone who is grateful to you to this day. (Scott, 2004)

Who is a school leader? *School leader,* as the term is used throughout this book, refers to any of the following: principals, vice and assistant principals, teacher leaders, and community leaders within the school community.

THE GOAL—MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Virtues are not mere thoughts, they are habits.

—*Aristotle*

The purpose of this book is to provide insights and skill development opportunities that will improve the ability of school leaders to facilitate effectively the challenging conversations that they encounter regularly. This book will enhance the ability of all school leaders to develop and manage effective relationships that will support ongoing school improvement initiatives. Ultimately this will have a significant impact on student learning and achievement.

The concepts and skills presented in this book will increase the school leader's confidence and competence in the face of challenge. School leaders are often highly skilled communicators who have effective conflict management skills. Many would suggest that school leaders already have the skills required to respond effectively to challenging conversations. Regrettably, there is no shortage of examples in public life of highly skilled individuals who have behaved poorly and spoken unwisely when under pressure. In this respect this book encourages school leaders, however skilled and experienced, to develop the required habits of mind that permit access to necessary skills and processes when it matters most. It is not only having skills and knowledge but accessing skills and knowledge when they are needed most that concerns us here. Think of how emergency personnel are trained—firefighters, paramedics, and lifeguards, for example. Their training focuses on developing almost automatic responses that are effective in the face of emergencies. Ideally school leaders will have the same kind of ingrained, effective response to challenging conversations.

For the most part the orientation of this book is toward difficult situations and potential or actual conflicts. It is about conversations that are uncomfortable and at times troubling. This is deliberate. If the school leader's daily life were only about the easy decisions and celebrations, life would be good indeed. Hopefully there are more celebrations than challenges, but in many regards it is the darker moments that define school leaders and their value to the school community.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK AND SPECIAL FEATURES

Many of the skills presented in this book are rooted in the field of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as it is widely practiced in the legal and broader community. ADR is sometimes referred to as a principled approach to problem solving and conflict management and is based on the application of superb interpersonal skills within the safety of a consistently applied process. Historically, ADR is rooted in the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project (now the Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program) as developed initially by Roger Fisher and his colleagues at Harvard. The publication of *Getting to Yes* (Fisher & Ury, 1983) represented the best popular iteration of ADR concepts and practices in its time and remains, along with many companion volumes by other Harvard-affiliated ADR experts, an essential resource for the ADR practitioner. Harvard remains a mainstay of ADR thought and practice to this day. Public school boards and community agencies throughout North America have also supported ADR-based programs such as Peer Mediators (Community Board Program, San Francisco) (Sadalla, Henriquez, & Holmberg, 1987) and made ADR a viable framework for developing peaceful and collaborative school communities. There are several key elements of ADR that are central to this book:

- The need to balance maintaining our relationships with others with pursuing our personal interests
- A focus on specific, substantive issues or problems defined by the interests and needs of everyone involved in a conversation rather than the personal failings of an individual—in other words, blame is of dubious value in both building and sustaining relationships and problem solving

- A reliance on a safe process that is principled and balances relationship needs with personal interests
- A goal of achieving mutual understanding, resolution of a problem, or consensus within a group

Since its inception, the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC, Toronto, Ontario, Canada) has offered workshops on ADR practices as they apply to school leaders, and recently OPC has supported a popular workshop, Challenging Conversations. This workshop, while informed by the principles and practices of ADR, is adapted to address the needs of school leaders in their daily work. This book is organized in much the same way that the Challenging Conversation workshop is organized. It is designed to promote personal reflection, to encourage the consideration of best practices in building trusting relationships within a school community, and to further develop the skills of school leaders in meeting the challenges of daily school life. Tools that will assist school leaders in developing effective skills in facilitating challenging conversations are presented. Chapters 1 and 2 of this book will consider the dimensions of challenging conversations such as the difference between a chat, a challenge, and a crisis and the effects of power and influence on challenging conversations. The book proposes an effective framework and process for addressing challenges. Chapters 3 through 7 will examine the essential skills required to respond effectively to challenges. Skills such as active listening, assertive communication, provision of effective feedback, and anger management are considered. These chapters review skills that many school leaders know well and often practice. Here they are placed in the context of a challenging conversation where they are absolutely necessary for success. The final chapter will focus on the potential role of the school leader as a third party to the challenging conversations experienced by others in the school community.

There are a number of special features that enhance the value of this book:

- Case studies are used throughout the book to illustrate specific concepts and skills. Each chapter will also conclude with a case study for the reader to consider on his own or with colleagues. In the Resources section of the book suggested approaches for these case studies will be provided. As the

reader compares his response to the case study to the suggested approach, it will feel like being coached through a challenging conversation.

- In Chapter 1 the reader will have an opportunity to develop a personal case study that will be revisited for reflection purposes at the end of each chapter. This will permit the reader to personalize the reading experience within her own context and reflect on her skill development and learning as she reads through the book.
- Suggested questions for book study will be provided at the conclusion of each chapter.
- The Resources section will include useful checklists and other instruments designed to further understanding of key concepts and skills.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

The material in this book will be of immediate value to practicing school leaders, regardless of their skill level or experience. For the beginning school leader the book will provide an opportunity to consider and develop essential leadership and interpersonal skills. For the experienced school leader this book will confirm considerable skill development and promote reflection on best practices.

Note on the case studies: The case studies used in this book are based on real incidents and represent the consolidation of the experiences of the author and the generous input of many school leaders who have participated in the OPC workshops. Their candor and commitment are much appreciated.