

# Foreword

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by Debbie Silver, EdD

Toward the end of my tenure as a classroom teacher, I received the opportunity to make a vision come to life. I was hired as a science teacher at a new elementary/middle school and encouraged to create a platform to engage our entire school and community in an affair I called our Science Expo. Along with the traditional International Science and Engineering Fair, I created an entire school–community event that incorporated every grade level and department. I led the charge to make it the biggest, greatest science extravaganza our district had ever seen. I had my principal’s full support, and together we encouraged every teacher and staff member to get involved.

I worked tirelessly getting sponsors, inviting local dignitaries, challenging students, presenting parent workshops, developing logistical plans, securing needed personnel, and recruiting exhibitors. I was exhausted when it was over but so proud of how my dream had come true. Everyone agreed that it was a total success that had put our new school on the map. A school tradition was born!

The next year I again took the reins to make our Science Expo even bigger and better. It was hard work, but it was worth it. And it was wonderful—until it wasn’t. The following year I left to take a staff development job in another city and later learned the Science Expo had come to a screeching halt. Why? Apparently, no one wanted to assume my overwhelming role as “Ruler of All Things Expo.” Teachers had supported me because of their loyalty to me, but they did not see the benefits for students beyond the single-day event. Without me there it just seemed like too much trouble for too little reward.

Naïvely, I had just thrown myself into a project without taking the time or the effort needed to demonstrate the value of everyone working together to make science come alive for our students. I had not

created a strategic plan, built a collaborative team, or even provided ownership for all involved. I had been an enthusiastic cheerleader and a dependable doer, but I was an incompetent leader. I had lost sight of the teaching–learning opportunity, which was the most important reason to have the Expo in the first place. Lesson learned.

When I began working in staff development, I was shocked by the amount of money spent every year on professional learning for teachers. I knew from my own experience there is often a huge disconnect between what is taught in workshops and what is implemented in the classroom. In 1999, I conducted research on which specific factors influenced teachers' classroom implementation of reform-based science strategies taught in our staff development program (Silver, 1999). I questioned why teachers often weren't connecting their new learning to their instructional practices. My findings pointed to the fact that the teachers who believed in the value of their training were significantly more likely to use the new tools and strategies provided in their program.

Experience as both a teacher and a staff development provider has led to my keen interest in what it takes to be the kind of leader who can inspire a team to “go outside the lines” to do incredible things for learners. I've learned there has to be buy-in by all participants, and no matter how effective an individual is, we are more powerful when we work in tandem and align our work with the goals of our schools and districts.

My husband is a marketing and management professor who is well versed in good strategic leadership resources. Through him I was aware of the book *Fake Work: Why People Are Working Harder Than Ever but Accomplishing Less, and How to Fix the Problem* by Brent Peterson and Gaylan Nielson. In their book, the authors set forth the idea that Fake Work is work that is not directly linked to the strategic intent of an organization. Fake work may be genuinely executed hard labor, but it is disconnected from the common goals, it wastes time and energy, and it drains away necessary resources.

I found myself wondering if much of what I had done as the Science Expo leader and much of what we do in professional development is actually Fake Work. I was delighted to learn that Nielson and Betty Burks joined forces to write *Fake Work in Education: Building High-Performance Cultures That Drive Student Success* about the fracture of our promise to serve the highest needs of our students. They believe that far too much of what is being done in and for schools today is Fake Work. They know that educators have neither the extra time nor the extra energy to do work that isn't focused on strategic intent, and they write about how to change things.

Using real educators' stories as well as practical, reflective, and tool-based resources, the authors lead educators step-by-step in how to build a high-performance culture, how to prioritize strategic plans that focus on ambitious targets, and how to adhere to Real Work. They embrace the “everyone a leader” type of leadership, and they demonstrate how to ensure that the work of educators is renewable and sustainable.

As I read their manuscript, I kept thinking, “Oh, I wish I had thought of that,” and “I should have known that.” Hindsight is truly enlightening, isn't it? The good news is that this book is as practical as it is insightful. Along with stories to help illustrate cogent points, it is a handbook of resources for any leader trying to ensure authentic, ongoing strategic design. Here are just some of the helpful resources you will find:

1. Exercises—You will reflect on your organization, your team, and your own work. They provide starting points for discussions and solutions.
2. Tools—Included both in the book and online, these tools help establish practices, create habits, and accomplish tasks.
3. Charts—Both open templates and completed charts prompt discussions and serve as guides.
4. Assessments—Both mini-assessments and comprehensive assessments are available in the book and online.
5. Steps—The book uses practical and easy steps to help break larger tasks into bite-sized pieces.
6. Checklists—There are dozens of checklists and tables that provide reminders of things to note and to do.

This candid, refreshing book is a *must-read* for anyone in education who is committed to sorting through all the checking of boxes, replicating paperwork, pointless meetings, top-down directives, adoption of “new and better” unvetted programs, and all the other Fake Work that keeps us from the important teaching-learning process. I wish I had had it a couple of decades ago when I was trying to find my way as an aspiring leader. However, it's never too late to learn, and I'm glad to have this book to help me get better at what really matters.



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