

Marshall Memo 849

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 10, 2020

A Principal Works with a Problematic Teacher (after Confronting Himself)

In this case study from their book, *Leadership and Learning; Personal Change in a Professional Setting*, leadership consultants Barry Jentz and Joan Wofford describe how Lew, a principal in an elementary school outside Boston, finally addressed his concerns with Helen, a long-tenured second-grade teacher whose troubling performance he had avoided for years. Lew and Helen (both names are pseudonyms) had a serious disagreement when he first arrived as principal, and that incident led him to undertake several years of coaching with Barry Jentz, reflecting deeply on how he was leading the school. Lew discovered, painfully, that in his interactions with teachers, he was more focused on being *right*, invulnerable, and in control than on learning, changing, and growing.

As Lew worked with Barry to change his mindset and skillset, he decided it was time to stop avoiding Helen and confront three major issues he had observed in supervisory visits to her classroom and heard about from colleagues and parents: (a) Helen was often sarcastic with children, some of whom were afraid of her; (b) the unstructured nature of her classroom was a bad match for some students, leading a significant number of parents to complain and request that their children be transferred to other classes; and (c) the caustic way Helen spoke to colleagues led some to feel intimidated, and she had few friends in the school. Notwithstanding these problems, Helen had a strong following among families whose children she'd taught during her many years at the school. These parents regarded Lew as a newcomer-intruder, and that was on his mind as he prepared to address Helen's performance issues.

What follows is a recreation of Lew's meetings with Helen during the 1976-77 school year. Some important background information:

- Both Lew and Helen were mid-career professionals, about the same age, the first in their families to attend college.
- The staff and students in this suburban school were largely white and middle class.
- In this era, the "open classroom" was in vogue, and many teachers, including Helen, were experimenting with reducing classroom structure and giving students more choices.
- There were no high-stakes accountability tests in Massachusetts in the 1970s, but parents cared about achievement, watched report card grades, and wanted their children to be prepared to do well in the next grade.

- Similarly, this district didn't have a teacher-evaluation rubric (Charlotte Danielson's wasn't published until 1996), but there were standards for teacher performance coupled to a traditional observation and evaluation process.

- The school didn't have what is quite commonplace nowadays – an instructional coach to provide support to teachers outside the formal evaluation process.

- The teachers union was not a major factor in this drama, probably because of Helen's loner status and reputation for being difficult. Colleagues did not rally around her as Lew raised upsetting information. This made it possible for Lew and Helen to have a series of tough conversations outside the formal evaluation process.

- Lew had something that very few principals enjoy: a skilled coach (Barry Jentz) who met with him to plan each meeting with Helen, then analyze and review the result. Before each meeting with Helen, Barry asked Lew to articulate what he planned to say (word for word), how he thought or feared Helen would respond (again, word for word); and how he would then respond – and why. Then Barry and Lew would role-play and analyze different scenarios – for example, *That won't work; what's a better response?* Lew's coaching sessions with Barry were audiotaped and transcribed, which made it possible to capture much of the dialogue between Lew and Helen – one of the case's most helpful features.

As you read, reflect on how Lew and Helen are handling each interaction. What surprises you? Impresses you? Doesn't make sense? Seems wrong? If you are a school administrator, do you have an educator in your school whose performance is problematic? If so, how have you handled (or would you handle) the situation? If you are a teacher, instructional coach, consultant, central-office leader, school board member, or teacher educator, what do you make of this case – and what are the implications? Finally, do you think it's possible for a school leader to orchestrate meetings like these without expert coaching?

First meeting

Two weeks after classes began, Lew dropped by Helen's class after school and asked if she would meet with him in the next few days in preparation for the evaluation he'd be conducting that spring. They agreed on a time later that week, after school. When Helen arrived in Lew's office, he was pumped up with anxiety and felt awkward as he asked her to take a seat. He stated his two goals: to clear the air about an incident that had occurred when he first arrived seven years earlier, and to have a frank discussion about his and other people's evaluation of her performance as a teacher.

Lew said that shortly after he began as the school's principal, Helen told him bluntly that there was a blatant contradiction between his failure to address a problem with his assistant principal and how he advised her to address a conflict she was having with the curriculum coordinator. "Implicitly, you said I was a phony, a fraud," said Lew. "I didn't tell you that you were a fraud," Helen interrupted. "Not in so many words," Lew conceded, biting his tongue and not mentioning that he knew she had used those words with fellow teachers. "At the time," he continued, "I hardly knew what to make of your behavior, except to label it bizarre, write you off as a crank, and get on with other business."

Lew said that her blunt words seven years ago had hurt him, but in retrospect he realized she was speaking truth to power and the encounter had been a learning experience for him. Lew said he could understand her being offended by the dismissive way he handled that incident and subsequently treated her. “I say all this in hopes of putting this part of our history to rest,” he said. “If possible, I don’t want it to cloud and confuse our evaluation sessions this year.” Helen acknowledged that she had felt dismissed as a “completely wacky” person.

Lew then turned to concerns expressed by parents about Helen’s work with children. She interjected that she’d always followed up with parents after Lew relayed their concerns to her, but Lew stopped her. “Please, let me finish,” he said, determined to get the whole story out and not get into a back-and-forth. Lew said that he had not shared a great deal of negative information from parents, members of the staff, children, and himself. “I withheld the information on the assumption that I was acting in your best interest,” he said. “I thought that if you heard this negative information, you would do a worse job rather than a better job. Now I see that I assumed you were weaker than I think you actually are. In fact, I was protecting myself, and I was patronizing and condescending to you, as indeed you have claimed in the past.”

Helen looked stunned and quizzical and said nothing, Lew continued, saying that there had been an increasing number of parent requests to have their children removed from the class; that number had gone from three his first year to 16 last year. “I can’t believe this,” said Helen. “How could this possibly be?” Lew said that requests for children not to be placed in her class had gone from three to 22, and that colleagues’ concerns about her teaching were similar to those expressed by parents. Teachers who spoke to her about their concerns reported feeling rebuffed, and others tiptoed around the placement process, trying to steer their students away from Helen’s class.

“Finally,” said Lew, “I am concerned about your teaching in precisely those ways which parents and other teachers articulate. Your expectations for all children to work independently in an informal, open atmosphere are too high and too universally applied. You tend not to listen to others who have valuable information about the children you teach – those include parents, teachers, children themselves, and me. You seem to err generally in the direction of not providing enough structure in your program. Finally, you use too much sarcasm with children.”

“I can’t believe you’re telling me this,” Helen exclaimed, shocked and angry. “How can this possibly be?” Lew held firm, saying, “It’s an outrageous situation.” As he said this, he felt a deep sadness for both of them. They sat in silence for what seemed like a long time. “Well, sir, you’ve come to your conclusion,” said Helen. “Now what?”

“I want to meet with you in a series of meetings,” said Lew, “once a week at this time, to attempt a conversation about this information and its implications for your teaching and my administering. I believe that what you and I have in common is our commitment to children. About that I have no doubt. It is in that commitment, though differently expressed by each of us, that I place my trust and find hope that we might learn together in ways that allow us to better serve children.” Helen said nothing. Lew got up, Helen got up, and she left the office.

Afterward, Lew met with Jentz and described what had happened. Lew felt urgently that Helen should “get on with it,” now that she “knew where the dog died.” But Jentz focused him on how violated Helen must feel, and, given that reality, how Lew could respond non-defensively to what would likely be Helen’s wounded response. Anticipating difficult interactions in the second meeting, they role-played so Lew could practice how to be inquiry-oriented, open to new information, and assertive.

Pause and reflect:

- What were the key moments in this meeting? Would you have handled them differently?
- What did Lew accomplish? Did he make mistakes?
- What skills did he use? Are they in your repertoire?

Second meeting

Lew didn’t sleep the night before the next conference and was anxious as they sat down together. “Helen,” he began, “have you been thinking about what we talked about last week?” “Have I been thinking about it?!” she exclaimed. “That’s all I’ve thought about.” “How do you think we’re going to solve this?” he asked. There was a long silence and Lew realized that he was jumping too quickly to solutions and Helen needed an opening to talk about the problem itself. Feeling clumsy and vulnerable, Lew said, “I’d think, uh, you might be furious with me.”

“I certainly am,” said Helen in a hard, cold voice. There was another silence that seemed to go on forever. “Since you came here,” Helen finally said, “you’ve been out to get me. None of this would have happened to me if you hadn’t turned the faculty against me! Just because I dared to speak up!”

Lew struggled to resist the urge to push back and win the argument. Instead, he tried to imagine out loud what he thought she was saying: “So, Helen, this is entirely my fault?” “Yes, it is!” she said, relentless. Lew continued to mirror her thinking: “There’s absolutely no question in your mind that I am totally to blame for all that has happened?” He was asking her to take full responsibility for her thinking – or perhaps admit to some doubt and become vulnerable. Another long silence.

“How could you keep that from me all this time?!” she said. “I can’t believe that the teachers said those things to you about me... Why wouldn’t you do me the decency of reporting parent complaints?” Lew’s immediate impulse was to see this as an attack on him, to which he would say, *Look, Helen, if you’d listened to the parents and teachers who did go to you, we wouldn’t be in this mess right now! You’re as defensive and closeminded now as you’ve always been.* But he stopped himself, realizing that her angry questions revealed vulnerability and her inability to understand.

“You might feel trapped and betrayed as a result of my withholding this information,” he said. This seemed to release Helen’s outrage and confusion even more. “It’s inconsiderate and irresponsible of you to dump this information on me after all these years,” she said.

“Years! I had no idea that there was such concern about my teaching! I’m a fine teacher. Fine teacher. I don’t know what’s going on here...” Her anger and confusion trailed into silence.

“I wish I hadn’t withheld that information,” said Lew, “and I think the consequences for you and for me were bad and are terribly painful. But I don’t see myself as irresponsible when viewed from the intention I had at the time – to make a safe, secure setting that would allow for learning, mistaken as I was...” Helen cut in: “Good intentions are no excuse for bad results.” Lew zapped back: “I hope you’ll apply that thought to your teaching as well as my supervision. Had I been more capable that first year of taking up your ‘dare to be open’ challenge in a more direct way, had I been less intimidated by you...” Helen interrupted again: “You were intimidated by me? How could you say that? You didn’t act that way. You just ran over me as if I didn’t have a brain in my head.”

For a few minutes the conversation shifted to reflecting on Lew’s early years at the school and how different Helen felt he was from the previous principal. But when she spoke dismissively about his policy of receiving parent requests for placement and transfer, he asked her why she thought he did that. “I don’t really care,” Helen said flatly. “Damn it, Helen,” said Lew, putting aside his usual controlled demeanor, “that’s exactly what comes through to parents and to me and underlies one of the central complaints about you – that you don’t care about what we say. You have one god – your expectations of children – and you look only at those expectations to tell you about whether or not you and the children are doing a good job. You refuse to look at and listen to us, and we have important information about these children.”

Helen punched right back, saying that she’d worked for years in the community before Lew arrived with his “fancy ideas,” and if the parents she’d worked with knew how he was talking to her... There were several seconds of silence. “How’s that,” asked Lew with genuine curiosity, again resisting the urge to counterattack. “What am I saying to you?” Helen was caught off guard and stumbled, close to tears: “You... you’re telling me I’m no good... I’m no good... If you had the nerve, you’d probably try to get rid of me... Isn’t that what people want?”

Lew knew that Helen had taken a risk articulating her worst fear, and he chose his words carefully, trying not to soften his message: “Yes, some of them want to get rid of you. Some of them want that. But I have not come to that conclusion myself. I have considered it, and I still am considering it, but I have not come to that conclusion right now. And I have not come to the conclusion that you are ‘no good,’ though there are things about your teaching that I don’t like and others don’t like either.”

They were both quiet for a moment, and Lew continued: “I’d like to suggest that we examine how you work with children and parents, in particular how you set your expectations and hold, or fail to hold, children to them.” Helen said, “Well, what if I don’t want to do that?” Lew replied, “Most importantly, I think you’d be missing a chance to learn. I’d also like you to consider a shift in grade level, where your expectations might fit better with older kids. It’s a shift to the fifth grade, which is possible. If that doesn’t work out, and you can’t alter your behavior, I will probably take action against you.”

“Is that a threat?” asked Helen. “Yes and no,” said Lew. “I consider it my responsibility to let you know where I stand.” Suddenly feeling very tired, he continued, “Helen, do you take it as a threat? And are you tempted to use it against me?” “No,” she said. “I don’t think so. But I am having a hard time understanding what’s going on here.”

“Helen, I’m tired,” said Lew. “It’s time to end this. I want you to come again next Friday at this time, and probably for the next three weeks to follow.” “You don’t mean it,” she replied, amazed. “I do,” said Lew. “And please think about whether or not you’ll join me in examining why people are dissatisfied with your teaching. I think you have to look at the fact that children are afraid. I can’t believe you want to frighten children. You are probably getting results you don’t intend. You and I together, I think, can make some headway.”

Pause and reflect:

- Was there a breakthrough moment in this meeting?
- What would be the effect of a union representative joining Lew and Helen at this point?
- Do you think moving Helen to fifth grade is a good solution?

Third meeting

Right off the bat, Helen asked, “Why do you think I should move to the fifth grade?” Lew said he hadn’t decided, was still gathering information, and she seemed to appreciate that. “I thought of your moving to fifth grade for several reasons,” he said. “The first is simple luck. There’s an opening. Second, all the other fifth-grade teachers are more structured in their approach to teaching than you are; your style would provide an option for parents. There are parents who want the option. Third, I believe your best friend here is Sharon. She’s a fifth-grade teacher whose style of teaching I think you respect, as do I. The two of you might help one another.”

Helen said, “I don’t even know what I’d do with fifth graders...” and her voice trailed off. “Fifth grade kids are able to do a lot more independent work,” said Lew, “and you encourage kids to work independently.” Lew realized that he was verging on giving her a pep talk, which was a way of rescuing her from her uncertainty. Better to let her own and grapple with it. After a long pause, Lew said, “Helen, maybe you were saying that you were pretty concerned about such a move...” Helen interrupted: “Yes, I am. I have no experience with older children, and I don’t know... it would be like starting all over again...” Her eyes began to fill with tears, and Lew had no idea what would happen next.

After another pause, Helen continued, with anger in her voice, “I was awfully upset after that last meeting, and I don’t think I can take another like it. Don’t misunderstand me, though. I am terribly hurt. It seems there’s been a conspiracy of silence against me. I have thought of nothing for weeks but the awful things that you have said to me. But I can see that you are trying to be honest with me.” Lew heaved a sigh, as if he’d been holding his breath. He felt understood by and genuinely warm toward Helen for the first time in these meetings. Helen went on, “I don’t know. I don’t think I can go further with this... at least right now...”

Lew asked if she was divided inside about continuing, and she said yes, once again seeming close to tears. After a pause, she asked, “Do I really have a choice about moving to the fifth grade?” Lew replied, “Yes, you do have choice. And so do I. Let me see if I can tell you where I stand. If you stay in the second grade, I’ll have to begin formally documenting a case for your removal, though at the same time I will continue to try to work with you to improve the situation. If you choose to move to grade five, I’ll agree. But I’ll have a clear expectation about seeing more rigorous, structured programs for certain children, more listening and taking into account information about children offered by others, and less reliance on sarcasm in your relations with children, and I would hope, faculty. I’ve tried to say that the heart of this matter *might* be corrected with a move in grade level. I hope so, but I have my doubts.”

“I think I’d like to think about this some more,” said Helen. “Can we stop for today?” Lew was disappointed but assented, asking for two more meetings and more discussion of the second-grade situation.

Afterward, Lew worried that he was making a fool of himself. He’d made himself vulnerable by telling Helen exactly where he stood and what he would do, which was quite a departure from a long-standing habit of holding his cards close to the vest. But that evening he began to feel better about the way he’d presented objective information, led Helen to confront it, and given her choices.

Talking to Barry after the third meeting, Lew realized that he couldn’t solve Helen’s classroom problems for her. He could give advice based on his own experience, but there was no way she could take his bright ideas, like light bulbs, and screw them in, lighting up her students. No, Helen had to examine her teaching and work out her own solutions, prodded and guided by Lew, and, hopefully by seeking help from her colleagues. Preparing for the fourth meeting, Lew realized that he was shifting from the role of evaluator, delivering the bad news, to the role of supervisor – and he worried whether he had the right skills to be successful.

Pause and reflect:

- At one point Lew resisted the urge to “rescue” Helen. Was this helpful?
- Did Lew go too far in saying he might take action if she stayed in second grade?
- Do you think Helen will agree to move to fifth grade?

Fourth meeting

Helen sat down and immediately questioned Lew’s criticism of her individualized teaching approach. “Because a few children are afraid of working on their own and can’t keep busy, you want me to make everyone do the same thing, like little robots,” she said. “You’re criticizing me because the ‘back to basics’ people are pressuring you.” Lew started to say that wasn’t his intent, but Helen interrupted him. “I teach the ‘basics’ better than most teachers. I did ten years ago, and I still do today! Why can’t the parents who want a more individualized approach have me as an alternative? You’re fond of touting the importance of *alternatives*.”

“I am in favor of alternatives,” Lew responded, troubled by the sarcastic way Helen said the word. “As I said the last time we met, I think you would present an alternative at the

fifth-grade level.” “Why not at the second-grade level?” Helen retorted. “Because I’m troubled about what happens between you and second graders,” said Lew, getting angry.

Helen continued with a new line of attack, saying that when she sent students to the office, Lew didn’t back her up and punish them. “And there are other teachers who feel this way, too.” Helen’s tone almost sent Lew over the edge, into counterattacking to stay in control. But her critique of the way he handled discipline problems genuinely troubled him; he’d heard that from at least one other teacher. Rather than falling into the back-and-forth dynamic, Lew took a deep breath and acknowledged the criticism. “Last year another teacher complained about how I discipline,” he said. “It shook me then, as you do now, because I’ve been quite satisfied with my discipline. To me, it’s important to talk with kids in a nonthreatening way so I can help them get to the causes of their misbehavior, instead of reacting with punishment to the symptoms, to the misbehavior itself.”

Helen started to speak, but Lew asked to finish. “I’ve been meeting my own expectations for performance in this area of disciplining children, but not yours and not those of another experienced teacher,” he said. “You and others have said this to me before, that I don’t punish children enough, and I’ve simply argued with you, trying to get you to see my view and buy it. What I never did with the whole staff is open up the question of a school policy toward discipline. I just made my policy the whole school’s policy. If I were to…” Lew decided to go further into vulnerability and enlist her in solving the problem she’d identified. He asked Helen what she would do if she were him.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Come on,” he urged. “Don’t back out now.” But she replied that it was his job, and now he was somehow trying to trap her. “Not exactly,” said Lew. “Isn’t this situation of your complaining about how I discipline similar to my complaining about how you teach? Each of us thinks we are doing the best for kids, yet other people are challenging what we do, questioning it. Each of us is asking the other to stop defending *why* we do what we do and examine *how* we are doing it, and perhaps change.”

After a pause, Helen admitted that the two situations were indeed quite similar. There was a long pause, and Lew was uncertain where the conversation was headed. Then Helen continued, “So what *is* the problem with children being afraid?” She seemed sad as she made the choice to join Lew in looking at her teaching. Lew said, “I think the thing to do would be to look at a particular child,” and mentioned Henry, a boy she’d had difficulty with for not doing his work – and whose parents had asked for a transfer to another class (Lew had not granted it). He asked Helen what went through her mind when Henry didn’t do his work. Helen seemed puzzled, and Lew said, “The idea here is that you’ve got reasons for treating him as you do. We have to look at those reasons if we’re going to try to understand what you do.” “He makes me furious,” said Helen. “I’ve gone out of my way for him, but he doesn’t work.” Lew pressed her for specifics, and she said, “He horses around and doesn’t get his work done!” Lew asked why and she said, “Because he’s lazy. He doesn’t want to do his work.” Her tone was tense but less testy than a few minutes earlier.

After a pause, Lew asked, “What do you do when he doesn’t have his work done?” Seeming cautious and afraid, Helen replied: “I do what you say I shouldn’t do. I get sarcastic.”

With some uncertainty, Lew said, “What you are trying to do, though... are you attempting to motivate Henry? Might that be... what you’re after?” This was a major departure from Lew’s usual approach of telling teachers to stop doing something (they complied when he was within earshot). By imagining out loud what Helen might be trying to do, he gave her credit for caring about Henry, rather than, as he had done before, implying that she didn’t.

Caught off guard, Helen replied, “Well, yes... that’s what I want... I want to spur him to work.” “But it doesn’t work with Henry, the sarcasm,” said Lew. “He still doesn’t want to come to school.” “That’s true,” said Helen. “But if he’d just settle down... and his parents could help with that. They are too lax with him.” Lew avoided another debate by saying, “Maybe you’re right about the parents.” After a long pause, he ventured, “I was wondering, though, maybe Henry fools around not because he’s lazy but because he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do or he’s afraid to do it, or...”

“But the tasks I lay out are explained in written direction,” said Helen. Seeming puzzled or confused, she continued, “If I single him out for special help and make things easier for him, he won’t learn to work on his own... He’s got to develop independence, to be able to take care of himself.”

After a long pause, Lew did something he’d never done with Helen – asked her if she wanted tea or coffee. She said yes to coffee, and as he prepared it on the other side of his office, Helen said, “What if Henry is afraid... or, what was it you said? You were suggesting that it’s not that he doesn’t want to work. You were saying that maybe he does want to work but doesn’t know how... for some reason?” She was trying to accurately capture what Lew had said, and also, however tentatively, asserting her capacity and right to change her ideas.

“Yes, you’ve got the gist of my thought,” said Lew. Helen continued, “I haven’t thought about it that way. I just thought... I guess I never really thought... Actually, I like the boy; he’s got such vigor. It’s just that he doesn’t apply himself... Do you have something in mind that you want me to do?” “Not right off the top of my head,” said Lew. He genuinely didn’t have a neat solution, but was pleased that she asked. “When you work with him individually, what...?” he said, but Helen interrupted: “I’ve gone out of my way to try to speak with him about applying himself more diligently, but I get nowhere.”

This general, unhelpful statement was a red flag for Lew, but he didn’t lunge at it. Instead, he continued to imagine out loud about how to deal with Henry: “Maybe if we looked at a specific time when you talked with him individually and tried to come up with some different approaches? I was thinking that today you and I have found we can talk differently together. I think there’s hope for you and me in this and there might be, too, for learning from what you and I have done and extending it to how you might talk to Henry. You’re not sure how you’d keep from getting angry and disapproving, caught in the same kind of trap you always get into with him?”

“Yes,” Helen said, looking surprised, “how did you know?” Lew took a chance and told her about how much he’d learned and been helped in their talks. They agreed to meet again in a week and settle the question of her moving to fifth grade, as well as talking about how she might work differently with Henry. However, Lew sensed that Helen was uncertain.

Pause and reflect:

- What was the impact of Lew admitting vulnerability on the way he disciplined students?
- What was the effect of discussing an individual student (Henry)?
- How do you think this is going to turn out?

Fifth meeting

Sure enough, before their next scheduled meeting, Helen sent a note saying, “We need not meet again. I have decided to move to the fifth grade.” Lew’s first reaction was to think, *Oh, damn it, I thought we’d gotten someplace!* but then realized that there had been considerable movement, from self-protective monologue to a dialogue in which both of them dared to be open. He put a note in Helen’s mailbox saying that they did need to meet again to discuss the move.

Soon after, Helen caught Lew in the hall and with a hard, fixed expression said, “I don’t think it is necessary for us to meet again.” “It is,” said Lew flatly. She retorted, “I could go to the union and file a grievance for harassment.” Lew sighed, thinking that all the work had been for nothing. Helen was calling his bluff, and he decided to call hers. “Helen,” he said, “I don’t think you really want to go to the union. I think you would rather work in supervision with me, but you seem afraid, naturally enough. I hope you will not act from your fear and go to the union, but challenge your fear by meeting with me. I hope you’ll show up at the regular time tomorrow.” As he walked back to his office, Lew didn’t know what she would do.

Helen did show up for the meeting, and Lew was surprised at how glad he was to see her – but the smile was quickly wiped off his face. “I’ll tell you what this is like,” she said. “It is humiliating. You are singling me out, as you would have me do with Henry, and shaming me in front of my colleagues.” Lew felt a twinge of guilt, but only a twinge; he was getting quite good at not taking Helen’s pain as his personal responsibility.

“I’m sure this has been and will be quite painful,” he said. “My hope, and perhaps yours, is that what will come of it is more learning for children. That’s what you and I are here for, what we’re committed to, and the central reason for our going through this gut-wrenching process. Helen, I’d like to follow up on our last discussion of Henry, where we were looking at your use of sarcasm, and I’d like to leave here today with a plan for your moving to fifth grade, a plan that will have the result of your changing aspects of your teaching we’ve discussed in these meetings.”

“You don’t trust me to change on my own, do you?” said Helen with a bit of sarcasm. “No, I don’t,” Lew replied, “at least not entirely. But I don’t see that as a negative comment on you so much as a statement of my belief that change is very difficult and necessitates regular support. Actually, what I don’t trust in you is your ability to provide yourself with the necessary support. I don’t see how you could trust yourself in this way, given your experience in this school as an isolate and loner.”

They sat in silence and Helen began to tear up. “No one’s taken the time with me before...” she said. Another long silence, with Lew feeling sad as well. “You’re right,” she

continued, “I don’t trust myself to get help. I’ve always thought it unprofessional, an admission of incompetence. When I was making up my mind to move to the fifth grade – you will allow the move, won’t you?” Lew said yes, and Helen continued: “When making up my mind, I thought a great deal about what you’ve said during these meetings, and I do want to do something about my teaching. In fact, I’ve already begun.”

Lew expressed curiosity, and Helen described at length how she was observing her students differently, including Henry. She realized that the horsing around and wasting time that annoyed her so much might be because she wasn’t providing enough structure for them to learn productively, even creatively. But when she provided him and a few other students with more help and structure, other students were making fun of them, and she needed help dealing with that. Helen also said she recognized how often she was sarcastic with children, but was finding it difficult to stop. Lew said that this recognition was the first and necessary step to possible change.

The meeting continued for some time, and they made a plan for Lew to visit Helen’s classroom once a month and have a sit-down talk after each observation. Lew said he would continue to think about the areas of his leadership she’d criticized. He also encouraged Helen to meet with Sharon, the fifth-grade teacher whose combination of structure and openness might be a good model for Helen when she moved to the new grade. Toward the end of the meeting, Helen said that until this series of meetings, she’d been unclear about Lew’s expectations of her as a teacher, and suggested that it would be a good idea for him to be more clear with the rest of the faculty. Lew agreed and said that their meetings had been a positive learning experience for him.

Pause and reflect:

- Calling Helen’s bluff on going to union was a risky move. Why did it work?
- How did Lew successfully pivot from the rocky beginning of this meeting?
- Do you think there will be a happy ending? Why or why not?

The aftermath

Following this final conversation, Lew worried that Helen’s change of heart might be illusory, but in the next few weeks it was clear that she was making a genuine effort to change. When Lew dropped into Helen’s classroom after school one day and asked if they could continue the conversation about Henry, she surprised him with a humorous jibe: “I thought you’d never ask!” As she described working individually with the boy, Helen said she still felt impatient and angry with his slowness. Part of her still believed that giving him this kind of help was doing him a disservice. Helen was having difficulty making the shift, but the fact that she could reveal her ambivalence was a positive development.

That fall, Helen moved to fifth grade, and in the years that followed, she worked productively with her friend Sharon, sometimes team-teaching. Her pedagogy and relationships with students improved and Lew stopped hearing parent complaints. What’s more, the culture of the school became more positive, partly because Helen was no longer a negative force. At

several faculty meetings, Lew raised the issue of how he disciplined students, listened to critical feedback, and made changes in his approach. In addition, following up on Helen's suggestion, he was more explicit with teachers about his pedagogical expectations.

Lew was principal at the school for several more years. Looking back, he knew that his meetings with Helen had been transformational for him as well as for her. Not only had he succeeded in turning around a problematic teacher, but he had become the principal he aspired to be: a leader who improved performance, his own and that of others, by becoming a self-reflective learner. He relished having found the courage, purpose, and will to claim the vulnerability that accompanies questioning, and then change his own mindset from be-right-and-in-control to something much better: *Be open to disconfirming information about your own practice and willing to learn, change, and grow as a person and leader.*

Overall reactions:

- What are your big takeaways from this case?
- If you have a "Helen" in your school, what steps have been taken – and should be taken?
- If action is taken, what support and skill-building would be needed?

Kim's reflections

What makes this case so interesting is the way it captures the *actual* back-and-forth between Lew and Helen over five emotionally and professionally challenging meetings. We can see in "real time" the skills being used, the stumbles, the near disasters, the recoveries, and the growth. An authentic, highly detailed account is far more helpful than theoretical writing about difficult conversations and courageous leadership. I hope this summary of Lew's Case will guide schools in orchestrating interventions that improve teaching, learning, and adult culture.

Reflecting on my 15 years as a principal – especially the times I avoided taking necessary action – some concluding thoughts:

- Lew clearly erred in not addressing Helen's performance *much* earlier. Tolerating mediocre and poor performance is one of the worst sins a school leader can commit.

- That said, Lew's courage, tenacity, and tactical skill in these meetings were admirable. He didn't give up on Helen and employed an array of techniques – among them, an organized presentation of concerns, structuring conversations, active listening, and sitting through silences – to reach a resolution that brought about real improvements for students and adults in the school.

- A confrontation like this is hard work, and much as we might hope for a quick resolution, it won't happen after one meeting, after several – or ever. In some of the case studies in Jentz and Wofford's book, the principal was not successful.

- When a school leader addresses lackluster and ineffective practices, having a coach or thought partner outside the school is essential for brainstorming, role-playing, and rethinking ill-advised approaches.

- Strong emotions arise in situations like these. We can easily get angry and impatient about the harm being done to children, the recalcitrance of a colleague, and our own flaws. Again, we need outside help to channel those emotions productively.

- The most important thing Barry Jentz did as Lew's coach was to help him confront some major shortcomings in his own leadership and get past his need to always be right and in charge. Only then could Lew successfully address his concerns with Helen.

- Finally, preventing the need for confrontations like Lew's and Helen's is the wisest leadership strategy. Here's a suggestion (this won't come as a surprise to those who know my work in recent years): short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits allow school leaders to spot mediocre and ineffective practices, and following up with informal coaching conversations can nip many problems in the bud, obviating the need for the kind of difficult and time-consuming work Lew and Helen had to undertake.

“Lew’s Case” by Barry Jentz and Joan Wofford in *Leadership and Learning: Personal Change in a Professional Setting* (Second edition, L&L Inc. 2006), available only at <https://www.entrybook.com>. Jentz can be reached at bjentz@entrybook.com.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine