Learning to Walk,

RECONSIDERING THE WALKTHROUGH

When districts make a deep investment in collectively and authentically struggling through their questions about improvement, they are more likely to understand the problems they face and act more systemically and strategically.

School leaders desperate for strategies that will i

BY RICHARD W. LEMONS AND DEBORAH HELSING

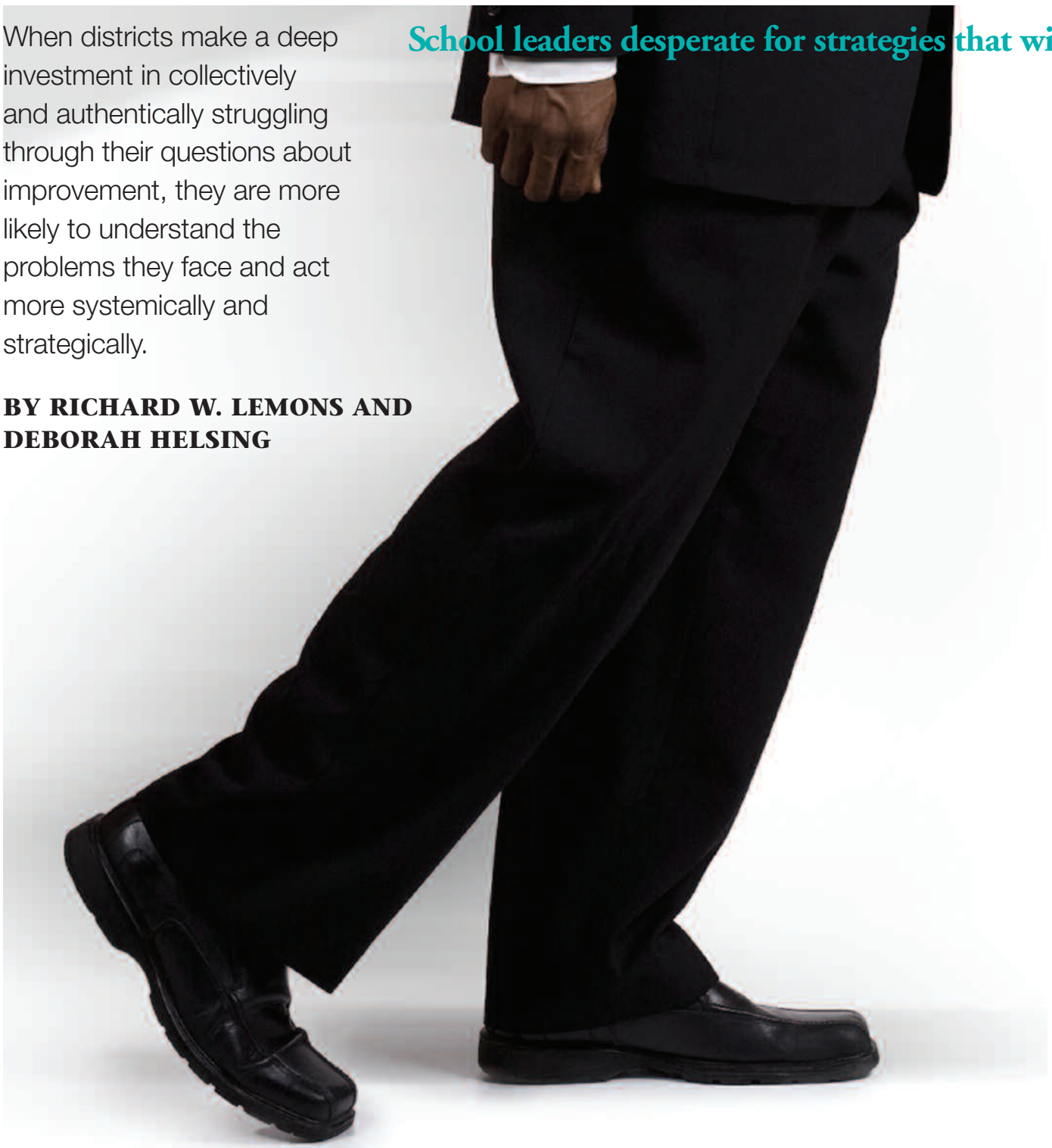

Photo: John Cowie/PhotoSpin

Walking to Learn

AS AN IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

improve student learning have often opted to embrace strategies that they have observed being used successfully in other districts. Sometimes, this works; sometimes, it does not.

Two vignettes about districts that made similar decisions to implement learning walks help demonstrate our beliefs about what is required to identify and implement a strategy that can be effective in your district. These examples are amalgams of real districts with which we have worked.

Alexander School District

After two years of hard work, Alexander Public School's central office leadership team was pleasantly surprised that implementing learning walks had gone more smoothly than they had expected. In spite of that, this initiative, like others before it, failed to deliver what it seemed to promise. Teaching practice remained largely the same, as did student performance. The initiative couldn't yet be pronounced "dead" because learning walks were still scheduled and conducted occasionally. But the reality was far from what administrators had envisioned.

In the beginning, the leadership team was energetic and optimistic about implementing learning walks. Neighboring districts were using learning walks to great effect, and after attending a workshop about organizational change and large-scale instructional improvement, they also wanted to introduce learning walks in their schools. They hired a company to teach principals to conduct learning walks. During a monthly administrator meeting, the trainers provided rich resources, including appropriate vocabulary for describing "high-quality instructional practices" and examples of learning walk checklists for documenting these qualities.

■ *RICHARD W. LEMONS is director of the Institute for Urban School Improvement, University of Connecticut, and senior program associate at the Change Leadership Group, Harvard Graduate School of Education. DEBORAH HELSING is a senior program associate at the Change Leadership Group and a senior coach for Minds at Work. They are among the co-authors for* Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools *(Jossey-Bass, 2006).*

Initially, principals received the news of the learning walks initiative with mixed reactions. Spending more time in the classrooms made sense to them. As building leaders, they should have deeper, more intimate connections with teaching and learning. But, they also felt anxious about where they would find time to visit classrooms regularly. They also worried that teachers might react negatively. Out of this worry, the central office and building administrators spent considerable time talking about how they could communicate and frame learning walks in order to reduce teacher anxiety and resistance.

After two years, principals report a greater sense of efficacy as "instructional leaders." They say they experience a deeper connection to classroom work, which once seemed so foreign and distant. These principals also report feeling more confident during discussions about teaching and learning with individual teachers and with the entire faculty. Teachers report that despite the intense anxiety and stress that emerged at the beginning of this initiative, having building administrators in their classrooms was no longer problematic. Relieved that implementing learning walks wasn't as hard as they expected, the administrative team directs its attention to other initiatives.

But, despite initial energy and anxiety, learning walks occur only twice per year, just before the superintendents' deadlines for principals to provide written summaries of learning walk results. They are a perfunctory ritual, not a core component of administrators' leadership practice, and new initiatives — such as a new math curriculum, districtwide training in "effective teaching strategies," and efforts to increase student engagement — have taken precedence. Although many teachers and administrators in Alexander Public Schools say learning walks have been successful, few can identify tangible improvements in teaching and learning because of learning walks.

Baxter School District

After two years of hard work, the principals and central office staff in the Baxter School District retained much of their initial enthusiasm for learning

walks. Despite struggle and frustration, they see evidence of improvement in teacher practice and student performance. Learning walks are a vital part of the district, a thread woven into the larger cloth of districtwide instructional improvement efforts.

The expectation that implementing one new strategy would lead to profound shifts in an existing culture ignores all of the ways the system has of pushing back to preserve itself.

Administrators introduced learning walks after spending a year collecting and analyzing data to identify Baxter's core problems related to increasing student achievement. They discovered that Baxter students performed well enough with material they had been directly taught but struggled with questions that required higher-order thinking skills to analyze a problem, to evaluate an argument, or to apply their learning to a novel situation.

Administrators agreed that learning walks could help them better understand 1) if instruction was geared to generate lower-level thinking and 2) when and how teachers were encouraging students to engage in higher-order thinking. That plan seemed simple. But the team found that their conversations were still as complicated as before. Principals realized they often didn't agree about what actually constituted higher-order thinking. Their conversations often strayed to other issues, such as classroom management, teacher effort, and assessment. When they noticed that honors students seemed better able to demonstrate higher-order thinking than other students, administrators found themselves arguing about student ability, teacher expectations, and the necessary scaffolding for kids to develop higher-order thinking. Often, they felt like they were generating more questions than answers.

Baxter teachers also had mixed feelings about the learning walks, and reactions ranged from excitement to outrage. The new practice unearthed questions that administrators had not yet identified and couldn't immediately answer: How would principals be trained to conduct learning walks? Should teachers be on learning walk teams, visiting their colleagues and debriefing identified trends and patterns? Would teachers have training in how to teach for higher-order thinking? Would they be evaluated on this? What were the constituent parts of high-quality teaching for higher-order thinking skills, and what did it look like in practice? In the absence of quick and easy answers, central office administrators and principals reassured teachers by suggesting that they were all going to have to learn this together. In addition, administrators articulated their collective reasoning for how learning walks could potentially lead to improved student performance. But they were uneasily aware that they could not guarantee any particular outcomes.

Two years later, Baxter has experienced noticeable changes, including how administrators conduct learning walks. They no longer look for evidence of higher-order thinking in classrooms. Now, there is districtwide agreement that all teachers are working to teach for these skills, and principals are looking primarily at how teachers implement particular strategies to encourage higher-order thinking and how this results in student learning. The district also has revised schedules, professional development, and evaluation systems, aligning them with the districtwide focus. Teachers learned how to design and conduct lessons promoting higher-order thinking. Teachers now work in teams, collaboratively designing lessons that promote higher-order learning and observing each other teach these shared lessons. As a result, teachers are coming to own and use a common language to describe their instructional practice, cultivating common standards of quality instruction, and

sharing specific strategies for promoting higher-order thinking.

These changes have proven difficult — teachers and administrators feel like they are working harder than ever, yet there is much to be done. Teachers have committed to develop common assessment standards for student work that emphasize higher-order thinking; administrators are struggling to identify what data they should track to determine how gains in higher-order thinking are affecting students' lives. So far, they have seen modest improvements in state test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. However, their college entrance rates remain flat, and they possess only limited data regarding how their graduates perform in college or work. These and other complex questions remain, and to the educators of Baxter, the work still feels complicated, ambiguous, and unfinished.

Conversations among the administrative team members remain difficult, in that they often raise more questions than they answer. Team members suggest, however, that they are getting better at knowing the right questions to ask and knowing that they have to ask these questions if they're going to make progress. Their work is no easier; the use of learning walks to explore the relationship between instruction and thinking skills of students has rendered the work even more complex.

What's Happening in Baxter That Isn't in Alexander?

What accounts for the different results of these two districts? Does harder work necessarily make for better work? If learning walks make so much intuitive sense and produce documented success in some schools and districts, why do they often lead to little substantive change in other locations, despite an initial burst of dedicated energy and resources? Educational leaders who hope to implement learning walks effectively can learn from Alexander's experience and work to counter common pitfalls and cultural tendencies. Moreover, efforts to engage in large-scale improvement of teaching and learning are destined to fail unless leaders understand the complex nature of this work as *adaptive, systemic, and strategic.*

Adaptive Work for Adaptive Problems

Alexander leaders acted quickly, and in doing so, they ignored large questions. They treated learning walks as a "silver bullet," yet another in a series of popular improvement initiatives promoted by practitioners and academics. Their unquestioning assumption that learning walks would change teacher practice and improve student learning led to a myopic focus on implementation of the strategy, not on more profound underlying questions and learning challenges generated by the strategy. Learning walks were enacted within the district's existing assumptions about schooling and on top of layers upon layers of past practice, making it unlikely that learning walks would produce transformational change.

Despite more schools and districts attempting to bring about large-scale improvement of teaching and learning, the evidence is staggering — it is far easier to talk about it than to do it successfully.

It's easy to see why it is so appealing and tempting to regard learning walks as a silver bullet for school reform. Increasingly, educational leaders take as a given that large-scale instructional improvement and instructional leadership are necessary to improve the learning of all students. Despite more schools and districts attempting to bring about large-scale improvement of teaching and learning, the evidence is staggering — it is far easier to talk about it than to do it successfully. And few models exist to demonstrate how we need to do business anew.

In the absence of coherent and well-defined models, discrete tactics and strategies linked — directly or indirectly — to improving teaching and learning become seductive allocations of human and material resources. In the last decade, numerous practitioners, scholars, and theorists have documented and advocated for the power of learning walks. Leaders who are desperate for improvement hear about a powerful strategy and move to implement it. Furthermore, learning walks make intuitive sense — they just seem right. Recently, a middle school principal succinctly expressed to us what others have suggested indirectly: "For the last 10 years, I've led this school, more or less, from my office. I know that if I'm going to develop into a more powerful presence in the instructional program of this school, I need to know what is happening in the classroom. Learning walks just feel like the right way to do that." This principal suggests that learning walks hold face validity for leaders, provid-

ing a tangible means of practicing instructional leadership.

Adopting learning walks as a simple answer to the daunting challenge of helping all students reach demanding standards is problematic because leaders are often using this strategy as a "technical" solution. Ron Heifetz (1994) of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government provides a useful distinction for considering learning walks and instructional improvement. Heifetz argues that there are both "technical" and "adaptive" problems. Technical problems are those for which there exists expertise that could be easily invested to produce a solution. In contrast, adaptive problems are ones that a single expert cannot solve. Instead, they require communities to alter values and beliefs as they learn to work in new ways.

Education has an assortment of adaptive problems. Schools must ensure that all students can master increasingly complex skills and knowledge. But schools are not designed to do this. Successfully addressing this challenge means that we cannot rely on school systems as they are. Although a handful of districts are making significant strides to increase learning and improve life outcomes for all children, education research over the last 40 years suggests that replicating these complex models in new contexts produces widely varied results. Silver bullets and technical solutions alone will not produce dramatic changes in schools and classrooms. What might look like a recipe for success — adopting a relatively efficient, straightforward strategy for improvement — actually inhibits organizational and individual learning necessary to tackle the adaptive problem.

What might look like a recipe for success — adopting a relatively efficient, straightforward strategy for improvement — could inhibit organizational and individual learning necessary to tackle the adaptive problem.

Baxter Public Schools leaders did not understand that the work they would be doing was adaptive, nor did they understand that their organization would need to re-culture and generate new learning. What they did, however, was invest in the struggle of thinking through learning walks. Instead of adopting an off-the-shelf package, they invested in understanding the problem they were trying to solve, carefully monitoring the results of this new organizational practice, and creating space to raise new questions. Baxter leaders also implemented learning walks in a way that challenged fundamental cultural norms of the district. For example, in focusing the school on higher-order thinking skills, leaders challenged the norm of instructional isolation, treating the teaching of thinking in individual classrooms as a collective good.

Systems Thinking

Large-scale improvement of teaching and learning is a daunting endeavor, one that our schools are poorly organized to accomplish. Further complicating this picture is the common educational practice of adopting new initiatives and layering them atop previous reforms and organizational practice, eliminating little and failing to understand all that would have to change to produce results. Peter Senge (1998), proponent of "learning organizations" and "systems thinking," argues that leaders often impose rather simplistic understandings on intricate realities, focusing on discrete parts and failing to recognize that organizations are complex and dynamic. As a result, or-

ganizations adopt short-term solutions without considering long-term consequences of those actions.

The leaders of Alexander Public Schools implemented learning walks with little recognition of the initiative's systemic implications. Learning walks were treated as a discrete activity, disconnected from other improvement efforts and organizational practices. These leaders focused on the short-term issues of implementation, misunderstanding the longer-term implications of learning walks for classrooms, schools, and the district. In addition, Alexander's leaders did not anticipate the many ways in which schools could stifle learning walks. As a result, they did not align various conditions, competencies, and cultural dimensions necessary for learning walks to have a more powerful impact on educational practice. The expectation that implementing one new strategy would lead to profound shifts in an existing culture ignores all of the ways the system has of pushing back to preserve itself. Ultimately, for Alexander Public Schools, as is the case for many places, learning walks become an add-on practice, a marginal and ritualistic activity divorced from the day-to-day work of administrators and teachers. Predictably, when the next compelling educational reform or strategy comes along, the attention to learning walks in Alexander (and elsewhere) will wane.

In contrast, Baxter leaders approached learning walks with a systems perspective, recognizing that improving teaching and learning is a long-term venture and that learning walks are just one tool for leveraging that change. They invested in aligning various aspects of the district to disturb organizational practice and generate positive change in all classrooms. For example, Baxter leaders altered the use of time and space to promote new forms of collaboration, implemented new professional development to support developing higher-order thinking skills, and adjusted the evaluation system to reinforce this new vision of quality teaching and learning. As a result, these changes aligned with and reinforced one another to create shifts in the entire system.

Strategic Thinking and Doing

Across the United States, district and school leaders are implementing myriad and numerous efforts to increase achievement for students. The current policy environment encourages taking action, enacting programs to increase student achievement, reduce achievement gaps, and make Adequate Yearly Progress. In this environment of constant urgency, when there exists vast uncertainty within the district around how to improve teaching and learning, adopting strategies proven or advocated elsewhere makes sense. Ultimately, however, this push toward action — any action — will probably exacerbate the problem.

When adopting a new initiative, what should schools or districts do that might help them find success? In our conversations with district leaders, we pose the following questions as points of departure:

1. What problem are we trying to solve with this initiative?
2. What is the nature of this problem? Is it adaptive or technical?
3. What other changes in the system might be necessary to leverage the desired improvements and to align the district around the effort?
4. What is our theory of action about how this initiative will solve the identified problem?

Alexander leaders take as a given that learning walks will improve instruction. Working from this assumption, they do not articulate how or test whether their hypothesis is correct. Leaving that thinking to the advocate for the program, Alexander's leaders have a weak "theory of action" — an explicit logic that explains how learning walks will produce what desired results and how. These leaders have only a superficial understanding of how learning walks could improve their practice, the instruction of teachers, and the learning of Alexander students. As a result, Alexander principals and central office administrators get lost in "doing" walkthroughs, and learning walks subsequently become discrete activities. Distracted and consumed by the technical aspects of doing learning walks, they attend to logistics and perceived obstacles, not strategic organizational goals. For example, some principals become preoccupied with how teachers will respond to the new initiative and may compromise the implementation of their plans to preempt anticipated negative responses. Certain central office administrators focus on how many classrooms will be visited, which classrooms will be visited, how decisions about which classrooms will be made, and how long the visits will last. They emphasize the rit-

ual of visiting rooms, not the changes that visiting rooms could bring or how the data collected could yield a new and more profound understanding of the nature of student learning in the classroom.

Issues of logistics and perceived obstacles are vitally important because poor execution of improvement efforts can destroy good ideas and strategies. However, these questions are best answered in the context of a clear theory of action, an articulated set of assumptions about why learning walks are being implemented or how they will help bring about desired results. In fact, clear articulations will likely simplify these concerns and increase the chances that leaders will communicate their hopes more effectively, reducing anxiety and creating more purposeful and authentic experiences for those visiting classrooms and those being visited.

In contrast to Alexander, Baxter's leaders treated learning walks as an opportunity to expose districtwide patterns in teaching and learning. Baxter's theory of action suggested that if leaders got into classrooms and carefully generated evidence regarding the strength of teaching and learning, then they could better focus the organization and align resources to support student learning. In fact, Baxter administrators made this thinking explicit as they discussed learning walks with teachers and one another. Baxter's unflinching look at its own problems, and the team's insistence on tuning in to tough issues, meant they constantly struggled to understand their theory of action for producing improved teaching and learning. Through long and difficult conversations, their theory of action did not simply become explicit; it evolved over time. It may prove tempting for planning teams to move past articulating why and how they believe advocated actions will produced desired results, especially when many leaders feel justifiable impatience for "admiring the problem" instead of identifying and implementing solutions. But while Baxter's yearlong study of its "problem" proved frustrating at times, that study helped leaders develop a shared sense of what problem they needed to solve. Their inquiry forged a collective clarity about what was required for meaningful instructional improvement and what role learning walks could play in that effort.

Conclusion

Of course, the leaders in Alexander are working just as hard as those in Baxter. It's unlikely that the Alexander leaders consciously chose to adopt a silver bullet that would oversimplify their improvement efforts. On the contrary, we assume that these leaders sincerely and admirably sought the most effective, efficient, and promising path to improve teaching and learning in their district. It may be, in fact, that the anxiety and responsibility they felt intensified their inclination to seek solutions and solve problems immediately. Alexander's leaders were successful in introducing learning walks — they began the practice, which helped nudge building leaders into classrooms. In the midst of this work, which was not easy, they become convinced they were doing the right work. The phenomenon of getting lost in "doing" various reforms is not uncommon in schools and districts. Moving to action is easy, and seeing some positive movement can persuade people that they are on the right path. Many districts have experiences similar to Alexander's.

This analysis of the way school districts and schools quickly adopt new strategies is not just about learning walks. Schools and districts across the country replicate these patterns in implementing many initiatives and programs, from adopting professional learning communities to developing new supervision and evaluation models. Unfortunately, when leaders implement these initiatives solely in a technical manner without recognizing the larger systemic implications and without a strategic theory of action, they produce little meaningful change in the long term. They waste the precious good will, energy, and optimism of all involved. As a result, there is less motivation and belief for the next initiative, which is advertised as the next great solution.

Stories about districts like Baxter provide us with glimpses into unusual and powerful ways that educational leaders and their organizations work together. When improvements are understood as adaptive, systemic, and informed by a theory of action, a strategy such as learning walks has rich potential for success.

The overarching lesson is that when districts make a deep investment in collectively and authentically struggling through their questions, they are more likely to understand the problems they face and to act more systemically and strategically. ◼

REFERENCES

Heifetz, Ronald A. *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.