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Corwin Author
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Right From the Start offers poignant examples, tools, and processes, and it inspires confidence in the potential for program and organizational transformation in multiple contexts. If you are seeking powerful, practical advice, this is the resource you've been looking for.

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Every leader who strives to make a difference can benefit from James Marshall's practical guide with its clear language and powerful examples. I wish I had studied this book 40 years ago!

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Professor and Dean Emeritus, San Diego State University
San Diego, California

Right From the Start provides leadership teams with a simple yet detailed framework they can utilize to examine the suitability of a program and to develop suitable programs for their context. It will help you identify key elements for consideration to ensure a higher level of implementation success.

—Ray Boyd
West Swan (Dayton) Primary School
Brabham, Western Australia

These tools support planning, selecting, monitoring, evaluating, and revising your programs collaboratively to raise teacher and student performance. The intentional practices and questions lead from knowledge to action to reflection, with appreciative inquiry.

—Helene Alalouf
Educational Consultant
New York, New York

James Marshall provides guideposts to avoid common mistakes. You will find common sense approaches to building good programs—understand the audience, the needs, and the design with impact in mind. Stick with Marshall's wise observations and guidance to get it right for the long term.

—Debra Tica Sanchez
Senior Vice President, Educational Media and Learning Experiences
Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Washington, DC

This is an essential guide for moving ideas into practice. All too often we are disappointed when the intended outcomes of our initiatives are not achieved. Marshall's work provides what leaders need for action and success.

—Andi Fourlis
Superintendent, Mesa Public Schools
Mesa, Arizona

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Right FROM THE START

The ESSENTIAL GUIDE to Implementing School Initiatives

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JAMES MARSHALL
Foreword by Douglas Fisher

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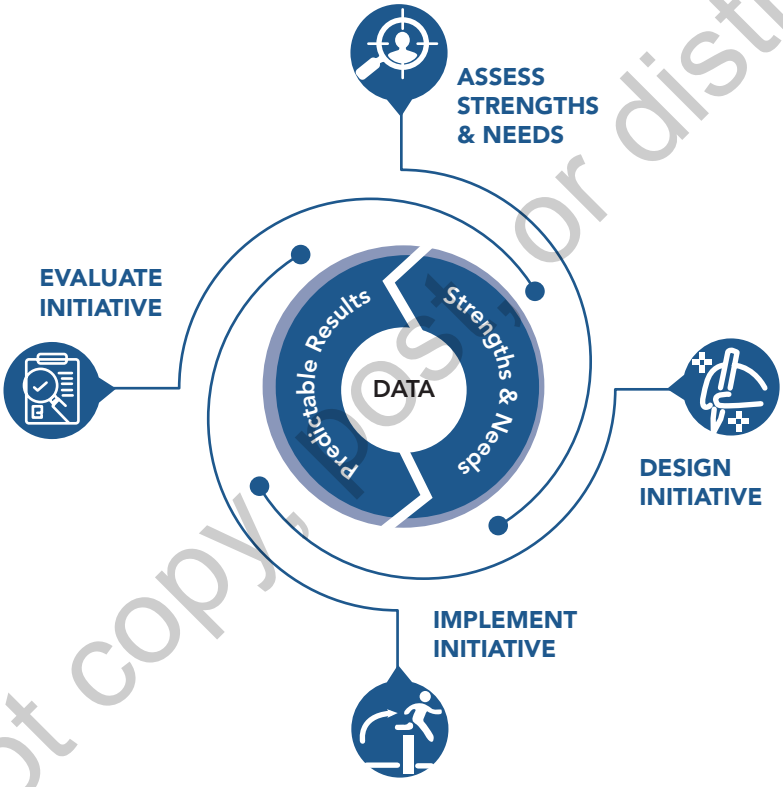

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Foreword

by Douglas Fisher

If there ever was a time that educators were inundated with initiatives, it is now. There are so many efforts, often funded by governments, designed to meet particular needs of specific students. Each of these initiatives has the *potential* to do some good, and we're thankful for the resources. But developing plans, coordinating the various efforts, not duplicating work already done (or in the official language of programs, supplementing and not supplanting), and monitoring the implementation can be overwhelming. In fact, some have argued that we exist in a perpetual state of *plan-maggedon,* in which we spend more time on the development of new plans for new initiatives and not enough time on implementation and monitoring impact. As a result, many of the initiatives that have great potential are a flop.

Fullan (2007) has taught us that change occurs over time and likely occurs in overlapping phases, from initiation to implementation to institutionalization. For an initiative to take hold, each of these phases is important and requires different actions.

The problem is that too much time is spent on initiation and not enough on implementation and institutionalization. In fact, upwards of 80% of the initiative efforts are devoted to initiation. It's not that initiation is unimportant. There are critical actions that must be taken at the start of an initiative. Unfortunately, many initiatives are left on the drawing board, so to speak. The plans have been initiated, perhaps the funding is secured, and the team is on to the next new thing. What gets left behind is the hard work of implementation and eventually, if the evidence supports it, going to scale with the ideas.

One of the challenges with initiation is what we decide to initiate. As Hattie (2009) notes, nearly everything we do in education "works"

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because it has a positive effect on students. But how much of an effect should our initiatives have? A minor positive effect is not likely worth the investment of time and resources. Interestingly, a child simply living for a year with no schooling achieves an effect size of 0.15. As Hattie notes, "Maturation alone can account for much of the enhancement of learning" (p. 16). Surely, we can do better than that.

Now, assuming we have a solid idea for an initiative or at least a way of responding to the funding opportunity that does no harm, then the hard work begins. There are so many distractions in education; we're continually searching for the proverbial silver bullet that will transform schools and their learners. Staying focused on the evidence-based ideas from the initiation phase is hard enough but is complicated by the fact that implementation is messy and fraught with conflict. As Mark Twain is purported to say, *"The only person who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper."* But the reality is that change is here to stay, and we need to figure out ways to support our colleagues in the change process.

When it comes down to it, we need tools to move from ideation to implementation. And we need tools to maintain our efforts and scale them, which is why *Right From the Start* came at just the right time for me. At our school, as I write, we're about to launch a community schools initiative. It's a fairly complex initiative, with four pillars (cpisandiego.org/community-schools):

- **Integrated student supports** that address out-of-school barriers through the coordination of trauma-informed health, mental health, and social services
- **Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities** that include academic support, enrichment, and real-world learning opportunities (e.g., internships, project-based learning)
- **Family and community engagement**, which involves actively tapping the expertise and knowledge of family and community members to serve as true partners in supporting and educating students
- **Collaborative leadership and practices** for educators and administrators that establish a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility for outcomes in a manner that includes students, families, and community members

Even if this is not the initiative that you're involved with, you can see that it's complicated and complex. Our team has many ideas based

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on our needs assessment and developed an amazing proposal that was funded. Then the reality hit and we had to begin implementation. The tools in *Right From the Start* guided us in moving from the planning and initiation stage to the implementation stage. Although we are not yet at the stage of institutionalization, this book set the stage for us in terms of monitoring and making decisions. Yes, we have had to modify our course based on the evidence we have collected. And we are better because of it. And we are witnessing positive outcomes for students and staff as a result of actual implementation of the ideas.

Regardless of the particular initiative you're interested in, from changing a classroom practice to altering the ways that schools operate, don't fall in the trap of focusing exclusively on initiation. The students and staff in our schools deserve much more. And the tools to deliver on that promise are in your hands right now.

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book is an intensely reflective task. While I've authored the pages you're about to read, that would have never happened without the many lived experiences and collaborations I've been so fortunate to have. Before we go any further, let me offer up credit where credit is due.

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About the Author

James Marshall's lifelong work lies at the intersection of people and the organizations in which they work—and optimizing the synergy that fertile convergence holds. His scholarship, teaching, and consulting combine our understanding of human performance and organization development to assess strengths, devise strategy, and improve even the most vexing of challenges. Engagements have found him doing everything from evaluating virtual reality-delivered training for active shooter containment, to devising strategy that improved the community-focused impacts realized by the national network of over 150 public television stations.

He is currently Professor of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University, in the #1 ranked California State University College of Education. In his private practice, he serves as a thought partner to leaders seeking to hasten the collective impact of their organization's investments—especially their human resources. From assessing strengths and needs to conceptualizing strategy and initiatives and then measuring return on investment, Dr. Marshall's unique approach relies on a proven mix of assessment and evaluation, appreciative inquiry, and empathic understanding that predictably yields quantifiable results. Clients particularly note his ability to use data—with novelty and persuasion—to drive change.

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With over 200 publications to his credit, Dr. Marshall's scholarship encompasses a diverse range of works that includes empirical research, program evaluation efforts, and policy development. His program evaluation endeavors are particularly significant and include over 250 individual studies of funded projects and program investments totaling more than $120 million dollars. This work has been funded by diverse agencies that include the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Library and Museum Services, the Public Broadcasting Service, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as well as the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of the Interior, and the Transportation Security Administration. His work with state and local education agencies, school systems, and regional offices of education encompasses forty of the fifty United States.

Internationally, Dr. Marshall has influenced human and organization performance through his service on the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) board of directors. Here, his needs assessment-focused research assisted the organization in better understanding its audiences and their needs, as IBSTPI reformulated its long-term strategy and support of learning leaders worldwide.

He can be reached at marshall@sdsu.edu.

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Introduction

If Any Outcome Will Do . . .

At the turn of the century, a consortium of school districts received funding to increase the abilities of teachers to teach history. Millions of dollars would support a multiyear, multicomponent program to both enhance teacher knowledge and change their "doing" as they applied that new content knowledge to teach their students. This setup is a familiar one. It's what I call the one-two punch: (1) enhance the teacher's content and pedagogical repertoire and then (2) successfully apply it in the classroom. Thereafter, student learning and achievement follows. As learning leaders, we know learning is not enough in the absence of application—whether applied to our teaching staff or our students.

Partnering in this endeavor would be esteemed history professors from a local, prestigious university. The program director worked with the university's history department chair to shape the professional development the teachers would experience. When it came to evaluating the program, which was the role I played, this was a dream project. That's because I was part of it from the beginning. I authored a tentative evaluation plan, matched to the high-level envisioned design, which was all part of the grant proposal.

With funding in hand, planning discussions continued, and as the program components were plotted on a timeline, I became curious. Acknowledging what is perhaps limitless possibilities in the annals of history, I queried the university partner as to the scope and ideally focus of the history content for this project. Their response to me was candid and went something like this: "You know, I wish I could tell you. But my assumption is that each faculty member will just reach into their desk ten to fifteen minutes before their scheduled teacher presentation, sift through some transparencies, select a few, and come and speak for the allotted time." To fully appreciate the picture in your mind,

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transparencies predated PowerPoint and were acetate pages used on an overhead projector. That said, this was mid-2000, PowerPoint was well established, and the transparencies, I believe, signaled the recency of the content . . . perhaps not in a positive way.

As someone who considers himself an intentional planner, I was stunned (while, of course, keeping a poker face). I left worried. Had I just witnessed a textbook case of this important initiative's early veering off its track? By the way—if you're picturing this situation, you've probably noticed that what happened here is basically acknowledging there is no, nor will there be any, "track." Stunning.

As I walked to my car that day, here is the beginning of the list of the worries that swirled in my mind:

- Will the spontaneous and serendipitous presentation of history content simply duplicate the existing knowledge of the participating teachers?
- Will the presented history content align with state standards that drive the participating teachers' instruction?
- Will the presented history topics be of interest to our participating teachers?
- Will the presented history content be areas in which the participating teachers struggle and where they could "up their game?"
- And across our participating group of teachers, will their diverse needs each be met—including preparing each to apply the content equitably with their equally diverse students?

You probably noticed that the first four things on this list are *participant* focused. It shouldn't be a surprise. If we truly want these kinds of initiatives to change lives, they must meet our participants where they are while also meeting their recognized needs. And yet, when faced with a new and novel opportunity, it is easy for leaders to lose track of that priority. These able and willing U.S. History teacher participants were about to "get what they get" rather than get something relevant and aligned to their world and their students' needs.

While there are multiple lessons to learn from this scenario, it offers a vivid non-example of focusing on the program's history teacher participants. The good news is that, over time, the teams met in the middle—as a result of program evaluation findings and a commitment to continuous improvement over the grant period. In the end, together

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we achieved something that was both relevant and aligned . . . but the original timeline was tripled.

So what's wrong with throwing caution to the wind and letting serendipity rule the day? Well first, most initiatives involving change come at a cost. Many require a school system's investment. The cost of pursuing one initiative includes not providing access to any number of other, possibly needed, efforts in your school. Additionally, most funded programs involve accountability to the local, state, or federal government who made the investment. But aside from each of these compelling reasons, failing to focus the outcomes and then align everything the initiative involves to those outcomes leaves students vulnerable.

What This Book Will Do for You

This book is all about initiatives—those in your school or across your district, those you present in partnership with people and organizations in your community, and those funded by the state and federal government. And most importantly, it is about turning your ideas into living, thriving, and impact-making initiatives.

Initiatives? Aren't We Really Talking About Programs Here?

If I was writing this book ten years ago, you would have just read something like, "This book is all about programs." But I believe our contemporary work as leaders must go beyond the traditional definition of "program." Many of the things we'll talk about are, in a historical sense, "programs." But here is a not-so-little secret: Programs dropped into schools and districts often fail—not always because they're not good . . . but rather because we fail to respect the true, change-inducing designs they involve and the implementations they demand.

Think about a textbook adoption. It's just about picking a book and buying it in quantity, right? If only it were that simple. The adoption of a new resource—or, shall I say, the *successful* adoption of a new resource—immediately rises to the "initiative" level. From the selection and purchase to training for classroom educators, developing wrap-around supports, establishing expectations for implementation, and continuously monitoring this change process for purposes of both continuous improvement and confirmation of impact . . . to be successful, it must be recognized as the initiative it presents. Look at all that's to be done, nicely simplified into just one sentence! As leaders, you can quickly envision what such a process might require along with the time it would take to do it right.

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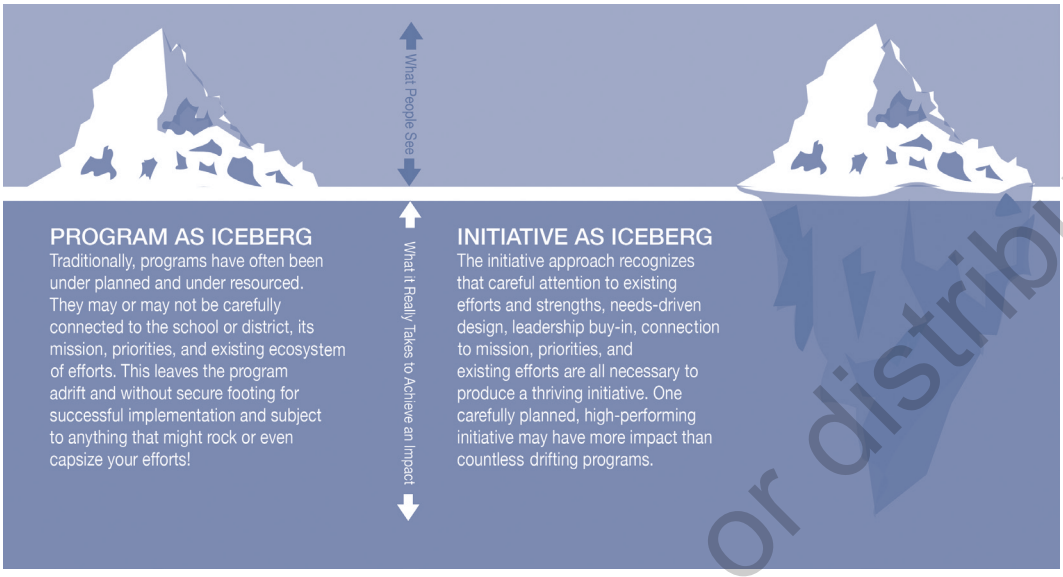
Figure I.1 Iceberg Model Comparison of Programs and Initiatives



How to Use This Guide

I've authored the book to build, confirm, and extend your knowledge about initiative planning, implementation, and evaluation. It is separated into three parts: **Getting Smart Through Needs Assessment (Part I)**, **Designing and Launching the Initiative (Part II),** and **From Implementation to Impact (Part III)**. It also includes the following:

- Tools for analysis and documentation
- Self-assessments
- Real-world examples (Tales From the Field)
- Discussion questions
- Pacing suggestions
- Glossary (terms in the glossary will appear in **bold** the first time they are defined in the text)

While you'll encounter the individual tools throughout the book, I've provided the full toolset for your use in Appendix C.

How you move forward with the book will depend on who you are, where you're working, what kinds of challenges you're facing, and how much time you can invest. While the book is written in a story-like fashion that you can read cover to cover, it's also organized so that you

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can quickly drop in on any stage of the initiative lifecycle at your time of need. Here are some other ideas of how different people in a variety of roles might use the comprehensive guidance and tools I've included.

- **Principals** can use this book to consider, craft, and create initiatives at the school level where they might use less formal initiative and evaluation plan documentation as they fold initiative work into their daily effort.
- **District leaders** can use this book to posit, plan, and pursue initiatives of all kinds, sizes, and complexities as they moderate the amounts of needs assessment, initiative documentation, and evaluation to the expectations of their team members and overseers.
- **Instructional coaches** can use this book to assess needs, design performance-focused initiatives, and measure their impact as part of their commitment to continuous improvement.
- **Teachers** can use this book as they design classroom-scale, grade-level, or discipline-wide initiatives that are responsive to student strengths and needs while directly contributing to learning and doing.
- **Everyone else** can benefit from this book by following the systematic design process you'll learn, which lends form to the entire effort, all the while keeping us focused on the people that will be involved in the initiative (participants and supporters) and the intended outcomes.

I'll assert that most of what I'll share is applied common sense. Yet because of our fast-paced lives and the endless press to get things done, we often forgot to reflect and apply that common sense to our benefit. But here is the promise I make: If you spend the necessary time to develop a something that is responsive to demonstrated needs, carefully reflects the participants involved, and integrates formative and summative evaluation to continuously improve results, your implementation will avoid the common pitfalls that send otherwise reasonable initiatives to the "didn't work for us" bin.

Setting the Stage

What Is an Initiative?

Throughout this guide, I will interchange the terms *program* and *initiative* because of how strongly their meanings overlap. However, there is a bit of daylight between them, and I will address that now.

I've suggested that successful programs reside within larger, carefully planned initiatives. Let's first define program. *Merriam-Webster*

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indicates that a program is "a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal." Breaking that down, for something to be a program, it needs

- a plan or defined system that guides action, and
- the action must be aligned with and move us closer toward a defined goal.

Next, let's consider the definition of initiative. This time, consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that an initiative—and I really like this—is "an act or strategy intended to resolve a difficulty or improve a situation; a fresh approach to something." As leaders, doesn't that resonate perfectly with what we seek to do?

Defining Initiatives

One thing is certain: No matter who we are, we are surrounded by initiatives each day. So far this morning, I participated in a virtual, online cycling exercise program; prepared a presentation to share a new Teacher-Leader master's program we're offering at San Diego State University with potential participants; checked in with the district manager of a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Sexual Health Education funded program that I evaluate for a large, urban school district; and reported how I'm feeling following a COVID vaccine to the v-check program. And it's only 10:00 a.m.

Now, think about the spaces where we work. As educational leaders, we are surrounded by learning initiatives. They're already familiar. A new mathematics curriculum, a social-emotional learning initiative across the district, a professional development effort around evidence-based strategies—each can be considered an initiative. Recognize that the initiatives we pursue in our schools almost always target some change in knowledge. But they also should target some change in behavior . . . in what we do. That means knowing isn't enough. Targeting knowing alone will fall short of impact. And that is a problem because impact is the change we almost always want.

My work creating and evaluating education initiatives for over thirty years suggests something about education leaders: You *love* creating impactful learning experiences. Why wouldn't you? You pursued this profession to help all kinds of people learn, to creatively craft experiences that make that happen, and ultimately, to change lives.

Doing, however, isn't as commonly considered. Think about it: As a result of learning, what do we want to happen? Perhaps more

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importantly, how do we "bake" doing into the programs we design to ensure predictable "doing" happens for everyone who engages? Not to worry, we'll get there!

Slowing Your Roll

This multi-part guide for planning, implementing, and evaluating *learning-and-doing* initiatives comes with some important asks, from me to you. Let me take a moment to put them on the table.

First, I'm going to ask you to stop thinking about all the great things your initiative might include. I'm going to ask you to hold off on drawing conclusions about what you need . . . just for a bit. And perhaps the most difficult: I'm going to ask you to not worry about how you'll pay or not pay for whatever it is you've got in mind during the first phase of the work.

What I am going to ask you to do now is reflect on what brought you to the point of even thinking about some new initiative.

- Your students' literacy scores have been steadily declining for the past four years.
- Your teachers should know more about reflective practice.
- The superintendent just came back from a conference and saw an amazing new *Arts in Action* program they are keen on starting back home.
- There's an exciting new grant program from the U.S. Department of Education that could provide more than $3 million over the next three years to help you improve new teacher retention.

Each of these poses a potentially great opportunity. In fact, I'll admit to getting just a little excited just thinking about each of them. Maybe you, too, find yourself saying, "Yes! We *should* have an amazing arts program!" Or, "Our teachers would *love* learning more about reflective practice." Yet your response should really be, "Our teachers *might love* learning more about reflective practice . . . let's ask them and take some time to figure that out and what that would look like here in our district." Another good response, "Our teachers *might love* learning more about reflective practice . . . I'm excited to hear from them about this so we can tailor a program that will match their needs." You see, *you* are not one of the teachers who would be involved. Regrettably, you are probably also not clairvoyant. If you are to craft a successful program for someone who is not yourself, begin by taking a giant step back.

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There are times I've felt like a "dream killer" when such words and phrases spring forth from my mouth, as I coach school leaders or sit at the table in the program evaluator role. Yet having seen too many programs miss the mark, sometimes because they fail to even establish a mark, I'm compelled to be the voice of reason at the earliest of stages. I know that some careful, intentional front-end needs assessment will yield predictable results in the long run, when "initiative meets world."

First Get Smart(er); Then Get Planning

Therefore, a good chunk of this first section is about understanding the place where initiatives happen, typically the school environment, and the people who must engage. I'm going to challenge you to take the time to understand both what *isn't* and what *is*. In the end, I predict you will enjoy taking this initial step back, engaging with your staff, and doing something good listening. To be fully successful, you'll have to suspend assumptions and do your absolute best to look at things with **fresh eyes**—setting aside your current understanding, presumptions, and biases and attempting to look at the situation anew. Remember, the dictionary definition of "initiative" included "a fresh approach to something." If you're currently leading a school, you might have a deep understanding about the people, needs, and programs that surround you. Set them aside, for now, and proceed with a mindset dedicated to both discovery and wonder. I promise, it will be worth the effort.

Where to Begin?

One thing I love about the initiatives is how they shape the people our students become tomorrow. Think back to some of the programs that got your attention and engagement when you were growing up—how some shaped who you did and did not become.

Can you remember a time when, during a training or professional development session that was content rich, you found yourself saying, "they really get me" or "it's like they knew exactly what I needed"? Well, "they" is the person who did the designing. And the process of "getting you" happened in one of two ways: either (1) dumb luck—which is unlikely—or (2) careful investigation of your needs and what's required to get you from where you are to where you need to be. Here is also where I'll suggest a program effectively rises to become an initiative—because it goes beyond some "event" to truly promote and sustain positive change over time.

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Now, you may also recall times when a program completely missed the mark. Symptoms here include experiences you deemed a waste of time, irrelevant, compulsory, or just plain ineffective. Oh—one more symptom I'm sure you'll appreciate: a program you completed but never once used—save perhaps a completion certificate that now serves as wallpaper.

Hitting the Mark

I used the term "hit the mark" earlier as a rather quick way of describing initiatives that carefully target learning-and-doing outcomes and that predictably see each participant reaching those targets. At the risk of belaboring my point, hitting the mark doesn't happen by chance. Rather, it involves a hearty mix of inquiry, target setting, implementation planning, and adjustment.

Perhaps most important is the simple fact that hitting the mark isn't going to happen where

- there is no mark,
- there are too many marks,
- the mark is ambiguous, or
- everyone is picturing different marks or interpreting a "defined mark" in different ways.

As a school leader, how can you design initiatives that not only hit the mark but do so predictively for all participants? The process begins with a careful review of the current situation. We work to understand needs and the people involved and then craft a mix of solutions which, when combined, comprise an implementable program. It's no coincidence that Abraham Lincoln is credited, by some, as saying, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

The initial axe sharpening work means **getting smart** about the following:

- Who is involved?
- What precipitated the new idea for this program?
- What is the current state of things?
- How does the current state differ from visions of the "ideal" state?
- What is happening currently that serves to keep your school where it is rather than where you'd like it to be?

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The process of answering these questions is often referred to as needs assessment and it is key to initiative planning.

Needs Assessment: A Tool Naturally Aligned With Leadership

As a leader, you are responsible for helping people see context. You must interest and motivate them to come along. The **needs assessment** skills you are about to discover will benefit any leader—whether you're designing an initiative or simply trying to understand a challenging situation. I predict you will call upon the **human/organization performance categories** you'll soon learn in your daily practice. It will help you better understand the world and the people around you.

Setting the Stage Wrap-Up: Meet Linda

Before we get too far, I want to introduce you to a friend and educational leader. You see, we've faced challenging situations during our regular work with staff, students, parents, community members—you name it. We've also pressed through the process and guidance I'm about to share with you.

Linda is an amazing staff developer within one of our local elementary school districts. She's responsible for the professional development for more than forty elementary schools, all within the K–8 grade span. Linda doesn't consider her work professional development but instead refers to it as "professional learning." Linda's been doing this work for twenty years, and she absolutely loves helping teachers be the best they can be. And that's a really good thing—because her work is critical when you consider she is planning, coordinating, and presenting training (or learning) for more than 1,600 TK–5 teachers in her district. She's also new to this district—having just taken helm of the professional learning team within the last year.

Linda is facing the district-wide implementation of a new family engagement initiative next year. In fact, she's part of the team that is working to figure out the program right now.

We'll check in with her again the end of Parts I, II, and III, but I wanted to introduce you now because understanding her journey will help you apply many of the initiative elements I'll share.

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