



## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDER EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING

S. DAVID BRAZER  
*George Mason University*

L. ROBIN KELLER  
*University of California, Irvine*

The purpose of this article is to construct a conceptual framework of educational decision making that accounts for critical factors in decision processes. Elements of the framework include multiple stakeholders' objectives and influence, varying degrees of collaboration, the concept of coupling between decision makers and stakeholders, and feedback as decisions evolve. The theoretical and conceptual contributions of this paper help to fill in an important gap in the decision-making and leadership literature by explaining the dynamics of multiple actors involved in a series of decisions over time. This conceptual framework is developed by presenting areas of inquiry that are not addressed in the current literature and responding to them in a step-wise fashion. A brief school district case is used for illustration. The paper concludes with research and practice applications of the conceptual framework.

Suggested citation: Brazer, S. D., & Keller, L. R. (2006). A Conceptual Framework for Multiple Stakeholder Educational Decision Making. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* 1(3). Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.ijepl.org>.

### A Simple Decision-Making Case

Salmon Run Union School District (a pseudonym) is a two-school K–8 district located in Northern California. Seven years ago, the superintendent at the time explained to the school board that California's recent Department of Education guidelines regarding student achievement and promotion requires every school district to set explicit, strict standards that determine student promotion to the next grade. Adding a measure of urgency to the situation, the California School Boards Association strongly recommended that all school districts take action to comply with state standards and to eliminate "social promotion." Members of the Salmon Run school board, believing that they were under the potential threat of lawsuits if they did not act, quickly established a narrowly drawn retention and promotion policy—any student not meeting state and local standards at a particular grade level would be retained. The superintendent left shortly after the retention policy was adopted by the board.

The current superintendent in Salmon Run is in his fourth year. Looking back on retention practices in the school district, he questioned whether or not the policy had the effect the school board originally intended. During the 2004–05 academic year, the superintendent decided to engage the school board and school community members in a "data-driven decision-making" process to determine if the retention policy was meeting its original goals and what, if anything, should be done if it wasn't. He brought together key stakeholders in the district, including two board members, two school site administrators, and ten teachers. Working with a consultant from a university in the region, this committee sought a deeper understanding of promotion and retention by examining relevant literature and by using the district's own student data to study how the current policy is being implemented. The committee also wrote, administered, and analyzed surveys to determine teacher, parent, and student perceptions of the effects and effectiveness of the retention policy. In the spring of



SIMON FRASER  
UNIVERSITY



2005, the superintendent used this committee's findings to recommend to the school board a modified policy that allows greater teacher discretion in retention and promotion decisions. The board adopted the modified retention and promotion policy.

## Introduction

We use the Salmon Run case, based on early data collection from a multisite study, to demonstrate how the decision-making model we develop in this paper works. The situation in Salmon Run seems quite straightforward: a very small school district is engaged in figuring out whether or not a policy is working and what their future action, if any, should be. The collaborative process in which the superintendent involved key stakeholders to help him make a policy recommendation to the school board has deep roots in leadership and organization theory literature.

For more than 20 years, conventional wisdom, as embodied in the popular management press, has advocated involving employees and customers in major decisions regarding the direction of formal organizations such as businesses or school districts (Covey, 1992; DePree, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Peters & Waterman, 1982). The main line of reasoning in this type of literature is that if stakeholders in a particular decision outcome are involved in crafting the decision, they will understand the decision better and be more committed to making it work. This Natural System perspective (Scott, 1998) has its origins in the Human Relations School of organization theory and is at the heart of many texts commonly used in education administration courses across the United States (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Lambert, 1995; Schlechty, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001). Recommending certain kinds of leadership behaviors may be helpful, but the same behaviors can also be exaggerated or poorly executed to the point they are counterproductive (Chater, 2005). What actually happens during collaborative processes is specified in literature on group work but does not apply well to educational settings (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Gersick, 1988; 1989; Hackman & Walton, 1986; Walton & Hackman, 1986). Consequently, new analytical tools are needed to understand how decisions such as those surrounding Salmon Run's retention policy and its revision evolve.

Embedded in the popular and academic literature that considers issues of leadership and decision making is a rational bias that makes three weak assumptions: (1) when leaders know that they should involve multiple

stakeholders in decision making they will do it proficiently because (2) leaders will understand and be able to manage interactions among stakeholders; and (3) decision making is a discrete event. We take issue with these assumptions because the ways in which numerous people participate in decision making is underspecified. With the exceptions of Allison and Zelikow (1999) and Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), theorists, empirical researchers, and authors oriented toward practice explain leadership and decision making before and after multiple stakeholders are involved but leave out what happens during the interactions of numerous players as decisions develop (Blase & Blase, 1997; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to build a conceptual framework, or model (we use the terms interchangeably), that researchers can use to help explain the process of multiple stakeholders hammering out decisions all along the chain from an initial decision to change policy, procedures, or programs through implementation in the classroom. Different components of the model account for differences in stakeholders' objectives and influence, varying degrees of collaboration, the concept of coupling between decision makers and stakeholders, and feedback in many different directions as decisions evolve. The end result is a unique conceptual framework for investigations into educational decision making that is dynamic and longitudinal.

Although our model is built step-wise, bringing in the Salmon Run example for purposes of illustration, a caution before we begin the building process is appropriate. Individual steps are intended to provide clear explanations, but we do not perceive any one part of the model as coming before any other. Rather, decision making is cyclical and often simultaneous, suggesting that researchers could begin to explore decision making at various points within the conceptual framework.

## Specifying a New Model for Decision Making

The model we develop serves as a hypothesis for how decisions that involve multiple stakeholders with multiple objectives are made in educational contexts. It takes into account the fluid and shifting nature of numerous people participating in decisions over time. In the absence of such a model, understanding of why specific school reforms are adopted and how they are implemented as envisioned, ignored, or modified is incomplete. The kinds of decisions we have in mind for this new model are strategic in nature—i.e., they involve

deliberate attempts on the part of districts and schools to make change—and they play out in educational settings from policymaking through implementation in the classroom. The model helps to create a bridge between existing theory and practice by focusing researchers on what educational leaders and their constituents are doing as decisions evolve.

The need for this new model of decision making is generated by the current lack of conceptualization of decision-making processes and gaps in the decision-making literature. We express these voids as areas of inquiry that raise conceptual questions we answer with the building blocks of our model. In subsequent sections, we elaborate on each component of the model and put these components together to develop a clear perspective on research into the details of educational decision making.

Figure 1 displays the areas of inquiry and our responses to them. Following the figure, we take up each inquiry in turn and go into detail regarding model responses, using Salmon Run to illustrate how the concepts in our model could be used for research. Salmon Run is a helpful case to illustrate applications of the model because of its relative simplicity. Implementation in Salmon Run had not begun as of this writing.

Therefore, we speculate about what could happen there to demonstrate how the conceptual framework can be used to investigate implementation.

### Multiple Stakeholders

**Area of Inquiry 1:** Which stakeholders participate in a particular decision is not clearly specified.

**Model Response 1:** Leaders find themselves at the center of stakeholder webs.

Decision making in complex organizations such as large firms, government, school districts, or schools naturally involves multiple actors representing a diversity of constituencies—i.e., multiple stakeholders. Decisions are not typically made by the leader acting alone to gather the facts and choose the outcome maximizing option because no one human being has the mental capacity to achieve optimality. Leaders' rationality is bounded (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; March, 1994; Simon, 1993). When situations deviate from routine, leaders seek information from trusted advisors prior to making decisions as a means to expand the boundaries of their own understanding and to enlist others in the final outcome.

An educational decision-making model requires accounting for the influence of advisors to educational leaders who have a stake in the decision or decisions

Figure 1. Areas of Inquiry and Model Responses

Area of Inquiry	Model Response
1. Which stakeholders participate in a particular decision is not clearly specified.	1. Leaders find themselves at the center of stakeholder webs.
2. The varying degrees of influence multiple stakeholders have in decision making are not clearly understood.	2. Power, legitimacy, and urgency determine how much influence stakeholders have.
3. Specific outcomes stakeholders seek in the decision-making process are uncertain.	3. Objectives hierarchies explain personal and professional goals stakeholders pursue.
4. Stakeholder involvement is often presented as uniform, yet participation in decision making can vary substantially.	4. Four types of decision making describe the nature of stakeholder involvement.
5. Implementation involves multiple stakeholder decision making.	5. The perceived degree of loose or tight coupling among stakeholders shapes implementation decisions.
6. Thinking of decision making as more of a process than an event emphasizes how decisions are modified over time.	6. Decisions are understood and modified through feedback from and to stakeholders.

being considered. These stakeholders bring varying goals, objectives, and interests with them to the decision-making process. Some of these will be aligned with the goals, objectives, and interests of the leader and other players and many will not (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

Just as leaders work with advisors, the advisors themselves represent larger groups, each of which has a set of core interests. The individuals in these groups may be clustered together as stakeholders who share at least some common interests. Not only do stakeholder groups exist inside the organization, but other stakeholders influence decisions from the outside. They are part of the environment in which the organization is embedded (Pfeffer, 1982). Stakeholders inside and outside the organization will have varying degrees of influence on decisions made from an initial change through implementation.

### Leaders and Their Stakeholder Webs

A simple conception of educational decision making places the school board in charge of overall policy with the superintendent acting as their agent. It is often assumed that the superintendent (or her or his assistants in larger systems) informs principals of the board's goals and the steps required to achieve them. Principals, in turn, decide how to proceed and inform teachers in a manner intended to achieve what the board and the superintendent seek. Teachers work with their students.

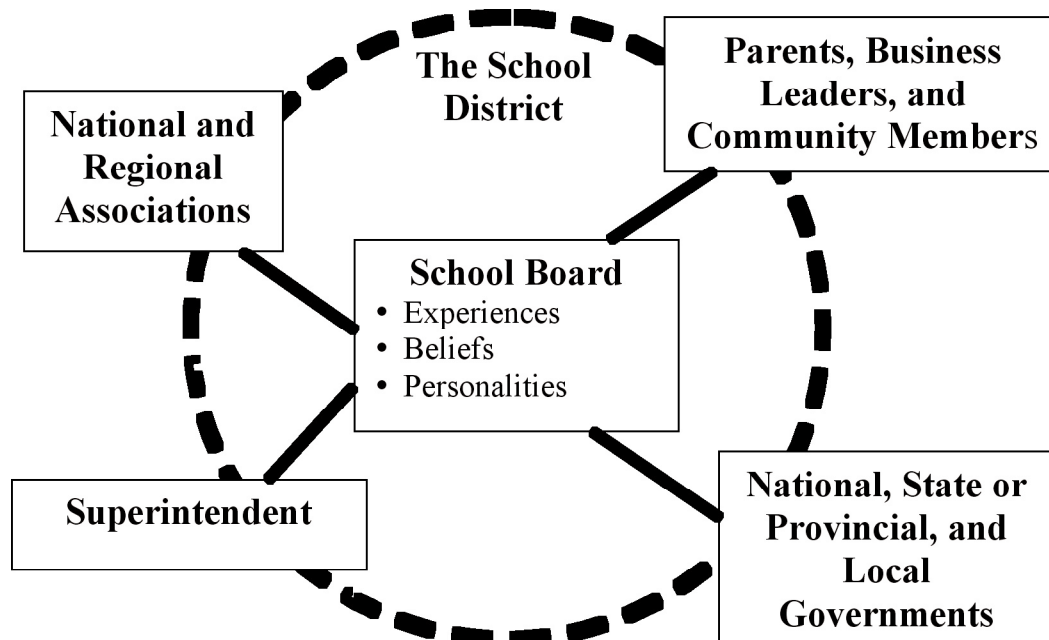
Even in this simple scenario there are many ways in which a board's directive can deviate from its original intent. Problems such as goal conflict, misunderstanding of policy, and poor relations among those charged with implementation may cause change and implementation decisions to veer away from initial purposes. To ignore this possibility is to remain naïve regarding how schools and districts function (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Using a stakeholder perspective in contrast to the simplified chain-of-command description above moves the conception of leadership into something that resembles more of a web. The board, the superintendent, and the principal each works within a web of stakeholders. Their webs overlap to some degree because of the public and open nature of schools and districts.

The school board has at least four major stakeholders influencing their decision making (see Figure 2):

- The superintendent acts as a formal advisor to the board on policy and serves as the board's executive to run the school district.
- Parents, business leaders, and community members strive to exercise influence with board members using implicit or explicit rewards and sanctions.
- National, state or provincial, and local governments influence through financial support available only if and when the rules and regulations they establish are followed.
- National and regional associations recommend to board members what and how to think.

Figure 2. The School Board's Stakeholder Web



We have listed example stakeholders, but which stakeholders are relevant in any given leader's web depends on the decision or decisions being considered. Stakeholders will likely enter and exit the web as their interests change over time and as decision foci change. For example, parents, business leaders, and community members might be very interested and involved in disaster preparedness policy changes and be completely uninterested in and absent from changes in budget reporting requirements from a county, state, or provincial office of education. Furthermore, the board itself is not static. Depending on the issue, varying experiences, beliefs, and personalities of board members will be complementary, contradictory, irrelevant to, or conflicting with one another and the stakeholders in their web will influence each of them differently.

When the Salmon Run superintendent from seven years ago exercised influence with the board at the time to adopt a strict retention policy, she used the state office of education as an authority and published articles from the state school boards association as additional influence on the board. The current superintendent downplayed those sources of influence as he worked with the board to modify the retention and promotion policy. A degree of division within the board is evident because some board members adopted the original retention policy while others were not yet on the board when it was approved. The superintendent was very careful not to force the more veteran board members into a potentially embarrassing political retreat on retention.

Superintendents function in their own webs within which the board members are but one set of stakeholders. Parents, business leaders, and community members are likely to exert influence on the superintendent in a manner similar to that of the board. But now a set of players collectively referred to as "the central office" makes up a new set of stakeholder groups. If the board mandates change in a particular direction, then the stakeholders who work on curriculum may find themselves in alliance with or in opposition to those who work on professional development. Meanwhile, the special services wing of the central office will be concerned about implementation that allows for appropriate accommodation of learning disabilities. In any district, principals may be the most important stakeholders for the superintendent because, spanning the central office and school sites, they run the schools where decision implementation largely takes place. Principals are probably of particular importance in Salmon Run because

there are no central office departments as they would appear in larger districts.

It is not hard to imagine that principals also have their own webs with some already familiar stakeholders such as the superintendent, central office staff, and parents. But new stakeholder groups may be preeminent for principals—namely students, teachers, classified staff, and assistant principals.

### **Stakeholder Influence**

**Area of Inquiry 2:** The varying degrees of influence multiple stakeholders have in decision making are not clearly understood.

**Model Response 2:** Power, legitimacy, and urgency determine how much influence stakeholders have.

An approach to educational decision making that explores the interactions among stakeholders and leaders requires revealing how webs of influence shape decisions—both change decisions and implementation decisions. Winn and Keller (2001) present a model based on retroactive examination of a decision in the business context that explains the relative influence of various stakeholders. The concepts and practical steps they develop can be applied to looking at a currently evolving decision in an educational context.

Winn and Keller (2001) argue that each stakeholder or stakeholder group is characterized by a certain degree of power, legitimacy, and urgency with regard to a specific issue under consideration. Power, legitimacy, and urgency reside at least partially within individuals or groups, but they may also be conferred by someone else. Anyone with moderate to high levels of two of the three categories of power, legitimacy, and urgency is considered most salient to a specific decision.

Power derives from position, relationships, access to resources, or a combination of all three (Pfeffer, 1982) and manifests as an individual's or group's ability to compel others to do as they wish (Bolman & Deal, 2003). In Salmon Run, for example, one board member appears to have more power than most others the superintendent has invited into the decision-making process. He is respected for his position and longevity on the board (position), for his position within his church (relationships), and for his white collar job status in a community with high unemployment and very few professional residents (access to resources). It is clear from our observations of meetings that, for any modification of the retention and promotion policy to be adopted, this board member needs to be persuaded.

Legitimacy refers to stakeholders' rights to involve themselves in a particular decision by virtue of their position in the organization. Similar to power, legitimacy derives from position—the board member mentioned has legitimacy because it is the role of the board to establish district policy. Legitimacy has also been conferred by the board and superintendent on Salmon Run principals and teachers whom they invited to help analyze the retention and promotion policy effects and to discuss possible changes.

Urgency conveys the time pressure stakeholders perceive with regard to making a decision. Salmon Run teachers and principals considering the retention policy were quite concerned about having a decision made prior to the end of school so that families could be notified in a timely way about the retention of their children.

### The Purpose of Influence

**Area of Inquiry 3:** Specific outcomes stakeholders seek in the decision-making process are uncertain.

**Model Response 3:** Objectives hierarchies explain personal and professional goals stakeholders pursue.

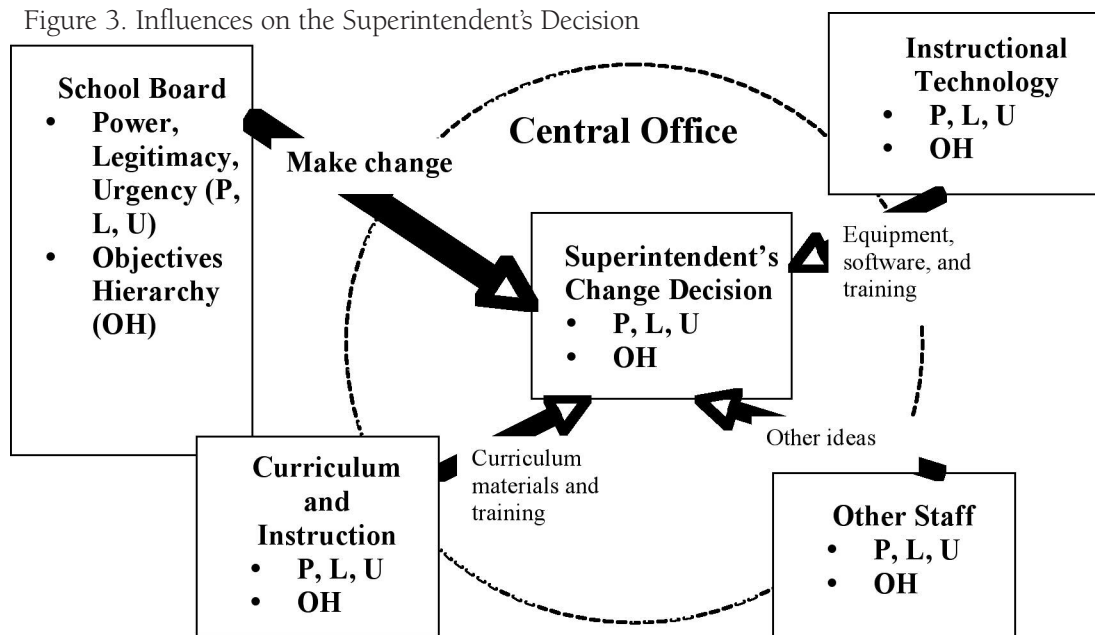
The objectives of key stakeholders are a motivating force as they seek to influence a policy or procedural decision. Different objectives are likely to have differing levels of importance. Therefore, objectives can be organized into a hierarchy specific to any given stakeholder or group of stakeholders. As the decision process is played out in public and private arenas, it then becomes possi-

ble to discover how various stakeholders' objectives combine with their power, legitimacy, and urgency to influence decisions (Winn & Keller, 2001). Figure 3 illustrates multiple stakeholders trying to influence the superintendent according to their objectives hierarchies and with varying degrees of power, legitimacy, and urgency.

Figure 3 shows part of a typical superintendent's stakeholder web in action. School board members could send a message to the superintendent that change is needed. It is then up to the superintendent to determine what the change will look like. Other portions of the superintendent's web will be activated as she or he seeks input from central office advisors to determine how best to respond to the board's call for change. Figure 3 includes a few groups and the likely content of their suggestions for the direction change ought to take. How superintendents decide to proceed depends on the interplay of power, legitimacy, urgency, and objectives hierarchies—their own and those of the groups involved in the decision process.

Salmon Run provides an interesting contrast to the typical example discussed above. In this case, the superintendent activated his stakeholder web by initiating data-driven decision making to consider the effects of the six-year-old retention policy. Neither he nor the board mandated anything, but the superintendent invited stakeholders—board members, principals, and teachers—to join him in data collection and analysis with the

Figure 3. Influences on the Superintendent's Decision



goal of crafting a policy recommendation to the board. How much each of the individuals in the superintendents' web has influence remains to be seen through our own data collection and analysis.

Up to this point in our model development, it is unclear how superintendents as central office leaders will engage with others who wish to exercise influence over a change decision. In other words, what is the nature of the collaboration that takes place? We turn to this issue in the next section.

### Gradations of Collaboration

**Area of Inquiry 4:** Stakeholder involvement is often presented as uniform, yet participation in decision making can vary substantially.

**Model Response 4:** Four types of decision making describe the nature of stakeholder involvement.

Researchers from a generation ago outlined variations in the extent to which a leader might engage in collaboration with other members of the organization. Vroom and Yetton (1973) propose a normative model that describes how leaders ideally decide the degree to which decision making should be collaborative. Depending on his or her level of expertise, the complexity of a particular problem, and the capabilities of subordinates or followers, the leader should choose to engage in autocratic, consultative, or group decision making.

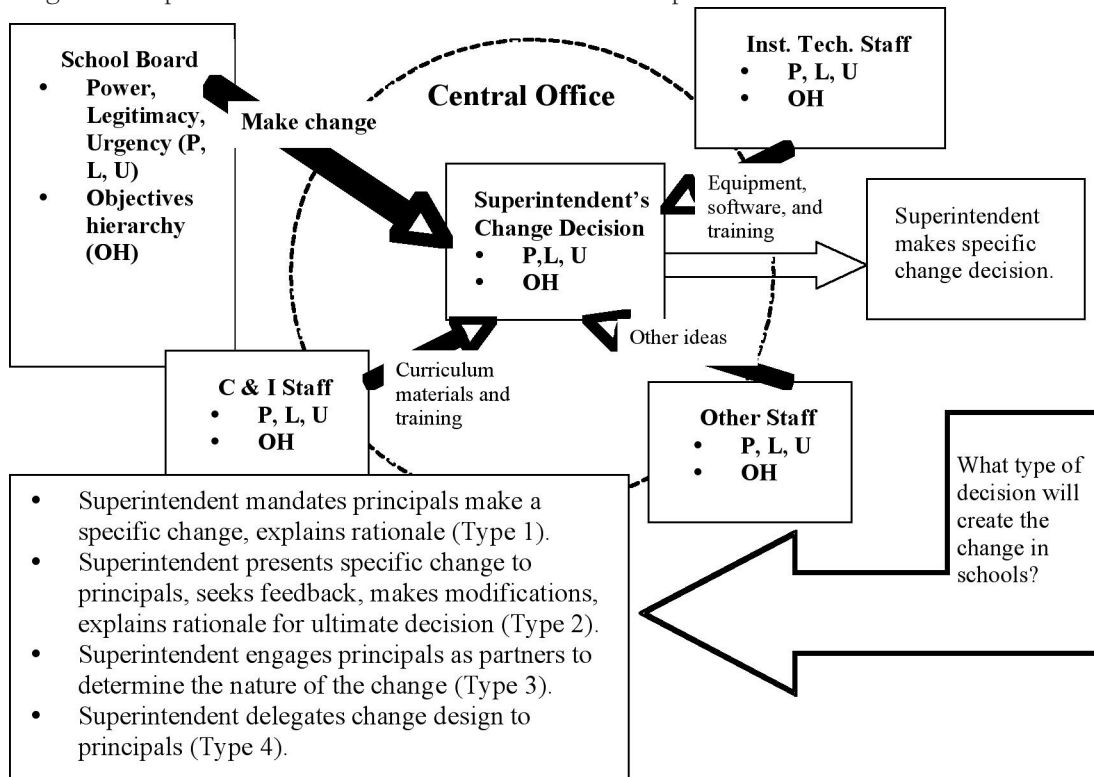
Vroom and Jago (1978) subsequently found that the model had predictive validity with regard to decision quality and follow-through. Jarvis (1993) simplifies the Vroom and Yetton model into four types of collaboration and adds a more prominent theme of follower motivation:

- Type 1—Leader explains rationale for decision to followers when follower motivation and expertise are low.
- Type 2—Leader seeks input from followers, makes the decision, and explains rationale for decision when follower motivation is high and expertise is low.
- Type 3—Leader works as a peer with a group of followers to arrive at a consensus decision together when follower motivation is low to moderate and expertise is high.
- Type 4—Leader delegates a decision to followers, holding them accountable to meet predetermined goals and standards when follower motivation and expertise are high.

Although we imply that the types are hierarchical by numbering them, they are not intended to be; the numbers are for easy reference. Leaders simply choose a type of decision making they judge to be most appropriate given a specific group's characteristics.

Figure 4 illustrates what it means to select a decision type as typical superintendents think about how to

Figure 4. Superintendent Decides How to Involve Principals



involve principals in a specific change decision. The primary question superintendents face is, “How do I engage principals in the change decision in a manner that enhances the likelihood that the change will actually occur in schools?”

The Salmon Run superintendent appears to have chosen Type 3 decision making—he invited teachers, principals, and board members to join with him as peers to formulate a policy recommendation on retention of students whose achievement levels do not reach standards. Before suggesting how superintendents in general might choose a decision type, we examine how they would analyze their relationship to principals.

### **Loose Coupling, Feedback, and the Non-Linear Nature of Educational Decision Making**

**Area of Inquiry 5:** Implementation involves multiple stakeholder decision making.

**Model Response 5:** The perceived degree of loose or tight coupling among stakeholders shapes implementation decisions.

Determining stakeholders’ power, legitimacy, and urgency with regard to a specific decision, analyzing stakeholders’ objectives to derive objectives hierarchies, and categorizing decisions according to the level of collaboration employed helps to reveal why and how decisions involving multiple stakeholders are made in specific ways. Yet, our conceptual framework as developed to this point remains too linear and too rational with regard to how schools and school districts function. The extent to which principals and others follow superintendent directives is uncertain and requires an analytical tool to describe the connection between what the superintendent intends and what others do.

The central office and the schools are parts of a system that have linkages, or couplings, to one another. Some of the coupling is tight and some is loose, meaning that directives and actions, causes and effects, are not necessarily linear and predictable. School systems are especially likely to be loosely coupled because authority is not particularly strong and the technical core is not very clear (Weick, 1976). In more practical terms, teachers easily ignore principals and superintendents by closing their doors and principals can avoid the gaze of the central office by not making trouble in a large, disparate system. The possibility of acting independently of central authority is further enhanced by the difficulty of a superintendent or principal to fully understand effective teaching for every grade level or subject area. Hence, weak

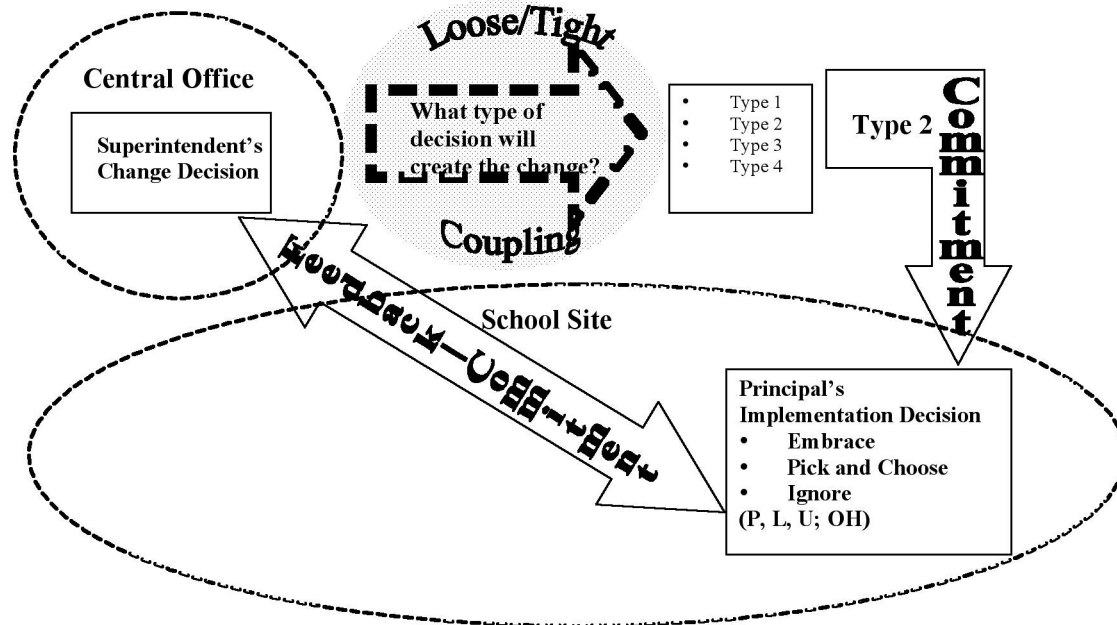
authority and incomplete understanding of educational processes are prevalent in school systems.

Model Response 5 focuses on the degree of tight or loose coupling in specific educational contexts. The type of decision making preferred by the superintendent and others will reflect, in part, their conceptions of the degree to which entities in the school district are tightly or loosely coupled to one another regarding a specific decision. For example, when a superintendent requires principals to conduct a certain number of fire drills each month because the state requires fire drills, units in the school district are relatively tightly coupled. The superintendent will deliver a Type 1 directive that is simple and easy to follow because routines for conducting fire drills are clear, as is the need to have them. A superintendent’s desire that principals establish and maintain a positive school climate, on the other hand, is much harder to define and is subject to many competing strategies. Consequently, superintendents dealing with such ambiguous issues are more likely to engage in Type 3 (decide together) or Type 4 (delegate) decisions. The result in this latter case will be greater variation because of weak authority and vagueness about what constitutes positive school culture. Figure 4 illustrates how the superintendent’s unspoken coupling assumptions affect the chain of decision making.

The central office stakeholders have been taken out of Figure 5 (next page) to focus on communicating change to school sites. In this generic illustration, a superintendent chooses Type 2 decision making to make change, i.e., she or he seeks feedback from principals on a change idea, makes modifications, and informs principals of the ultimate decision and rationale. We can assume that superintendents do this for at least one of two reasons: (1) they seek greater certainty that their change idea is a good one and will work in schools and (2) they solicit input from principals as a means to building their commitment to the change. By selecting Type 2, superintendents perceive the coupling between the central office and school sites as relatively tight—their directives will be followed if principals have input—but looser than if they had selected Type 1.

Many participants in the Salmon Run study reported to us that, when asked, the superintendent refused to offer his own position on what any sort of retention and promotion policy modification ought to look like. The superintendent told us that he wanted to keep the process open and inquiry based and that he had no desire to drive his decision-making group toward a specific choice. His aim was to have the whole group arrive

Figure 5. Superintendent Choosing a Decision Type Based on Perceptions of Tight or Loose Coupling



at a consensus decision for a board recommendation. The Type 3 decision making chosen in Salmon Run reflects the superintendent's desire to achieve goals similar to those in the generic case above. But, the superintendent's strategy of engaging stakeholders in Type 3 decision making reflects looser coupling beliefs compared to Type 2 decision making. In other words, the Salmon Run superintendent may have believed that board members, teachers, and administrators would not necessarily follow any recommendation or directive he might give simply because it came from him. The consensus building process would lead to a decision that all key stakeholders would implement more consistently because they had a hand in crafting it, not because of central authority.

Principals, either in Salmon Run and or in the hypothetical case, now have decisions of their own to make (listed in Figure 5). When presented with the superintendent's effort to get their commitment, they can choose to read a superintendent's preference and demonstrate commitment—genuine or not. Another alternative is to take the efforts to win commitment literally and implement if persuaded and not implement otherwise. Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that principals in the generic example decide to cooperate with the Type 2 decision from the superintendent and express commitment. As seen in Figure 5, this is one form of feedback that goes from principals to the superintendent.

Principals' initial decisions to express commitment to the change decision put forward by the superintendent

are likely driven by their objectives hierarchies, which may include: (1) survival in the job (most principal positions are one-year contracts), supported by agreeing with the superintendent; (2) improving school performance as perceived by the board and superintendent so that the school gains or retains legitimacy; and (3) maintaining cooperation within the school community if the change is implemented.

No matter how they may appear to the superintendent and to their teachers, principals, in general, will make implementation choices regarding a change effort that are based on perceptions of their own power, legitimacy, and urgency and their objectives. They will look at what is proposed and select one of three possible options: (1) embrace the change largely as the superintendent and board envisioned it; (2) engage in partial implementation by picking and choosing which aspects of the change to put in place; or (3) say what is required of them but ignore the intended change, thus saving energy for other activities. A fourth option is to thwart the change actively because of a fundamental disagreement with the idea, but we assume at least a minimal degree of compliance.

The implementation decision process just described is likely tied to a somewhat different set of objectives from those articulated in the discussion about how principals would react to their superintendent. In deciding how to approach implementation, principals will consider: (1) the personal and professional goals they have established for themselves in the role of principal; (2) the

direction in which they have led their school (if indeed there is a specific direction); and (3) their level of commitment to the success of the change decision. This second set of objectives helps to explain that individual stakeholders within a group may have objectives hierarchies that shift over time.

For illustrative purposes, we assume that the principal in the generic illustration in Figure 6 embraces the change. Similar to the superintendent, principals must choose how to communicate about implementation of the program to staff, likely keeping in mind the above objectives and their own power (moderate), legitimacy (high), and urgency (low–moderate) with regard to implementation decisions. Understanding the relative autonomy of teachers and their prerogative to choose to engage in change initiatives, to modify change initiatives, or to ignore them (Friedman, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), principals seem unlikely to select the Type 1 approach. Most principals, well steeped in contemporary wisdom about developing positive human interactions, would likely choose Type 2 or Type 3 in an effort to gain teachers' commitment to implementation. But the board, the superintendent, and the principal face a common problem: the more implementation discretion principals provide teachers, the less likely implementation will resemble what the board and superintendent originally envisioned. We assume that principals tend to emulate their superintendent and implement through a Type 2 decision by explaining to teachers the direction the superintendent has established and how the principal interprets it. Principals will then incorporate teachers'

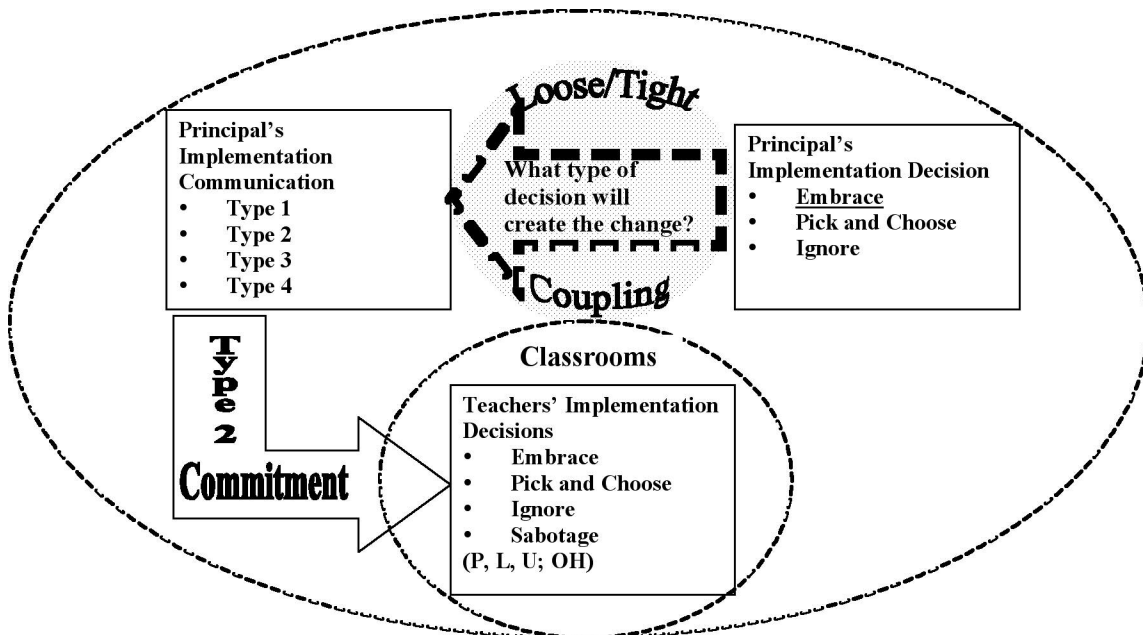
feedback in the ultimate implementation plan. The Type 2 choice is also principals' acknowledgement that they are more loosely coupled to what happens in classrooms than an outright mandate would suggest (see Figure 6).

Implementation in Salmon Run is somewhat uncertain at this point. Now that the policy has been modified, principals seem more likely to implement the change with a high degree of fidelity both because they understand it (having had a hand in crafting the modification) and because they are committed to it (having been involved in the process). Yet, whatever principals choose to do, teachers may be far more influential in retention and promotion decisions.

The fact that teachers do not always do exactly what principals tell them is well established in organization theory literature as the principal-agent problem (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). The term principal in this case refers to the person who seeks a particular action, while the agent is the person who engages in the action. School principals' consideration of teachers' autonomy suggests they understand that their agents will not always act as they wish. To increase the likelihood that actions by teachers will be consistent with what principals seek, they will engage in commitment development similar to what superintendents did with principals in both the hypothetical and Salmon Run examples.

When principals take the commitment approach with their teachers, they recognize teachers' high degree of power and legitimacy regarding instructional changes. Teacher autonomy is a source of high-position power—they are in classrooms teaching students and administra-

Figure 6. Principal Choosing a Decision Type Based on Perceptions of Tight or Loose Coupling



tors are not. Teachers' high legitimacy stems from the fact that they are subject matter and grade level experts who have primary responsibility for instructional outcomes. Teachers' urgency is probably low if they believe that their prechange practices are at least adequate and they are not eager to take on the extra work that change involves. Teachers' combinations of power, legitimacy, and urgency ensure that they are autonomous stakeholders in the process of implementing instructional change decisions.

Teachers stand between what policymakers intend, what administrators direct, what students and parents expect, and what occurs in classrooms. By their decisions and actions, teachers determine the degree to which a policy is implemented faithfully, transformed to fit the classroom, or ignored. (Cuban, 1988, p. 33)

Teachers' objectives hierarchies will influence how they choose to sway implementation decisions. Most teachers have student academic success as one of their objectives. As they determine how (and whether) they will implement a change, teachers are likely to consider the following additional objectives (among others):

- The efficient use of time and energy for the various demands of teaching and their personal lives.
- The desire to use effective strategies for improving student achievement.
- Keeping their teaching manageable.
- Helping (or not) the principal succeed in the eyes of the board, the superintendent, and the community.

Considering teachers' objectives, they have implementation choices similar to that of the principal—embrace, pick and choose, or ignore (Friedman, 2004)—and they have a fourth option: to sabotage the program.

### **Decision Making As a Process Not an Event**

**Area of Inquiry 6:** Thinking of decision making as more of a process than an event leads to an exploration of how decisions are modified over time.

**Model Response 6:** Decisions are understood and modified through feedback from and to stakeholders.

In our effort to explain a chain of decisions—from an initial change through implementation—we run the risk of suggesting that information flows in only one direction. This is not our intent. We previously discussed feedback briefly to explain how superintendents might know that their principals are actually committed to a change decision. Feedback flows back and forth between stakehold-

ers and decision makers, among stakeholders and among decision makers. Furthermore, stakeholders become decision makers and vice versa throughout the decision process. For example, principals provide input into a superintendent's change decision, then make decisions themselves about how to implement it.

Feedback moves in many directions simultaneously. Just as superintendents receive information from the school board and other stakeholders, they also communicate about how they have processed this information. Their communication may be in an effort to persuade, it may be to get additional information, or it may be intended to stake out a specific position. Likewise, teachers will have contacts within the central office and will provide information back to them as they hear about change and implementation decisions. As a result, information flows back and forth and throughout stakeholder webs as change and implementation decisions evolve. Feedback not only provides information to stakeholders and decision makers, it also influences their thinking and may therefore simultaneously influence change and implementation decisions.

### **Summary of the Conceptual Framework**

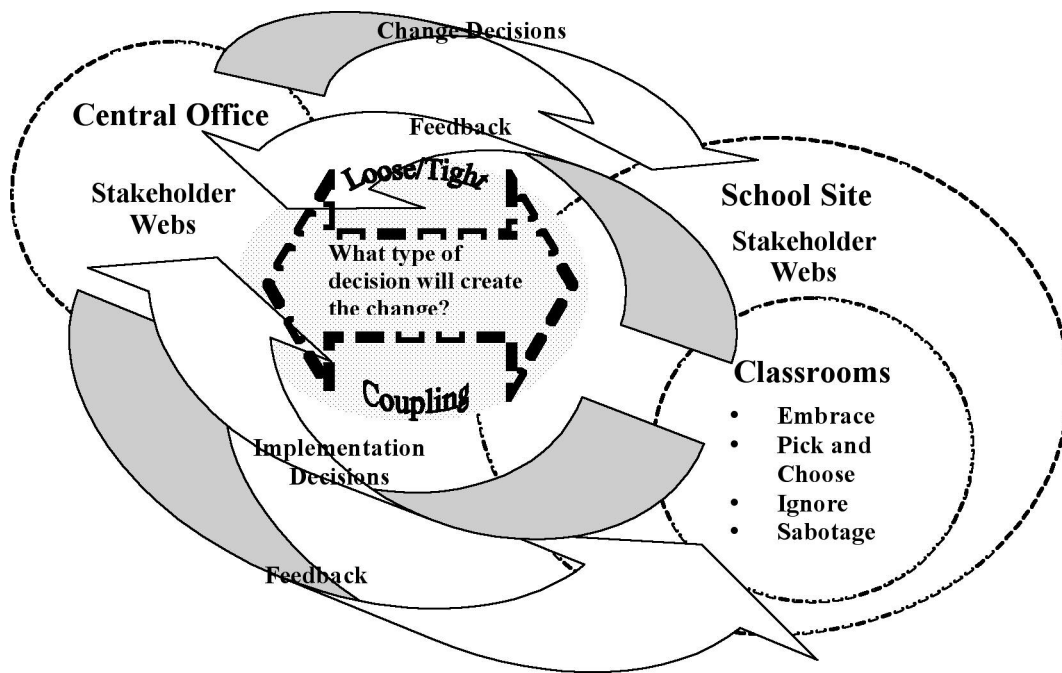
Our conceptual framework for multistakeholder decision making is simplified for purposes of illustration. Levels of power, legitimacy, and urgency are difficult to specify. Objectives hierarchies are likely to contain many objectives that are more nuanced than those we have named. Nevertheless, the overlapping nature of educational stakeholder webs, the characteristics of multiple stakeholders, various types of collaboration, the concept of coupling, and feedback provide helpful concepts to explain how decisions—both to make and implement change—get made.

Figure 7 (next page) brings together the major components of the model into a general picture. Change decisions generated by multiple stakeholder decision making at the central office are considered and subjected to multiple stakeholder decision making regarding implementation at the school site. Feedback flows throughout the system as stakeholder and leader roles change through the decision-making chain.

### **Conclusions**

Each Model Response to each Area of Inquiry we put forward in this paper applies essential concepts from decision analysis and organization theory literature. The narrative of the paper demonstrates how we combine these

Figure 7. A General Conceptual Framework for Educational Decision Making



concepts to build a conceptual framework that will guide data collection and analysis of decision making in progress. As such, it is a substantial departure from past studies of decision making in both the private and public sectors that are retrospective (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Keeney, Renn, & von Winterfeldt, 1987; Rogers, 1995; Weick, 2001; Winn & Keller, 1999; 2001). Investigating educational decision making as it happens has noteworthy research and practical applications.

### Research Applications

Retrospective studies of decision making have helped lay the groundwork for considering decision making from a multiple stakeholder multiple objective perspective. But when those who have participated in a decision from the past are asked to recall how they made that decision, they will engage in rationalization, filtering, and forgetting that alter how the decision actually occurred (March, 1994). Mitigating these kinds of problems requires that researchers collect data from decision makers and stakeholders while they are engaged in decision processes.

The model we develop in this paper helps researchers understand what data must be collected to investigate decision making as it happens and how to analyze it. Specifically, our own current fieldwork involves surveys, interviews, and observations focused on multiple objectives held by multiple stakeholders,

types of collaboration, degrees of tight and loose coupling, and feedback that alters the nature of decisions as they evolve. Using this model as a research perspective should yield a more realistic picture of change and implementation than has been available up to this point.

The dynamic and longitudinal characteristics of our model provide an opportunity to capture the unpredictable coming and going of decision participants, problems, solutions, and circumstances. Beyond that, it illustrates complexity and subtlety in decision making by emphasizing the simultaneous interplay among issues, leaders, and stakeholders. The example of Salmon Run demonstrates that even relatively simple decision-making situations quickly become complicated through the interplay of multiple stakeholders. Developing the kind of perspective embedded in our model is vital for investigating decision making in both small and large school districts.

### From Theory Into Practice

By being descriptive in its current state and by evolving into a prescriptive tool as field work is completed, our model can guide current and prospective leaders as they assume responsibility for decisions they do not fully control. We anticipate that as the model is used for empirical studies and modified and validated over time, it can be used to guide professional development that helps educational leaders to engage in multiple stakeholder

decision-making processes more effectively. Professional development could include learning how to identify key stakeholders and their objectives; how to assess power, legitimacy, and urgency among various stakeholder groups; how to analyze the degree to which organizational entities are loosely or tightly coupled to one another; how to keep implementation faithful to the original change decision; and what to do with feedback that occurs throughout the entire process.

Under ideal circumstances, researchers would work side-by-side with district and school leaders to observe how the model functions in practice, to coach administrators on the use of the model, and to make modifications in the model that enhance its prescriptive legitimacy (Lave & March, 1993). If educational leaders are able to use the model well, then researchers would examine the quality of their decisions in terms of measures such as consensus or stability. If leaders use this model with a high degree of fidelity, but decision processes or outcomes are poor quality based on some objective measure, then practitioners would engage with researchers to figure out what from the model is invalid or missing, make modifications, and try again. If the model is both used well and helps to develop higher-quality decisions, then it would make sense to try it in different contexts to see if the validity and quality hold.

By co-designing professional development focused on decision making and jointly testing the hypotheses implicit in professional development activities, both researchers and practitioners will learn how to create stronger links between leadership and school improvement (Foster, 2005). Clearer theoretical and practical understandings of decision processes at the district and school levels will aid educational leaders as they strive to improve the quality of education. Few decisions move in simple straight lines. The kind of analysis that stems from our conceptual framework helps to capture the uncertainty and nonrational aspects of decision making in education. Armed with this knowledge, educational leaders may be more capable of guiding their districts and schools in the directions they intend.

## References

- Allison, G., & Zelikow, P. (1999). *Essence of decision: Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*. New York: Longman.
- Blase, J., & Blase, J. (1997). The micropolitical orientation of facilitative school principals and its effects on teachers' sense of empowerment. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 35, 138–164.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chater, M. (2005). Archetypes of destruction: Notes on the impact of distorted management theory on education communities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 8, 3–19.
- Cohen, M. D., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1972). A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17, 1–25.
- Covey, S. R. (1992). *Principle-centered leadership*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cuban, L. (1988). *The managerial imperative and the practice of leadership in schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- DePree, M. (1989). *Leadership is an art*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Foster, R. (2005). Leadership and secondary school improvement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 8, 35–52.
- Friedman, A. A. (2004). Beyond mediocrity: Transformational leadership within a transactional framework. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7, 203–224.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gersick, C. (1988). Time and transition in work teams: toward a new model of group development. *Academy of Management Journal*, 31, 9–41.
- Gersick, C. (1989). Marking time: Predictable transitions in task groups. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32, 274–309.
- Hackman, R. J., & Walton, R. E. (1986). Leading groups in organizations. In P. S. Goodman (Ed.), *Designing effective work groups* (pp. 72–119). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jarvis, W. (1993). *Four quadrant leadership staff training*. Lane Cove: NSW, Australia.
- Keeney, R., Renn, O., & von Winterfeldt, D. (1987). Structuring Germany's energy objectives. *Energy Policy*, 15, 352–362.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2002). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lambert, L. (1995). *The constructivist leader*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lave, C. A., & March, J. G. (1993). *An introduction to models in the social sciences*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

- March, J. G. (1994). *A primer on decision making*. New York: The Free Press.
- Pfeffer, J. (1982). *Organizations and organization theory*. Boston: Pitman Publishing.
- Peters, T. J., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies*. New York: Warner Books.
- Rogers, E. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Schlechty, P. C. (2001) *Shaking up the schoolhouse*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Scott, W. R. (1998). *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (2001). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Simon, H. (1993). Decision making: rational, nonrational, and irrational. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 29, 392–411.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vroom, V., & Jago, A. (1978). On the validity of the Vroom-Yetton model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 63, 151–162.
- Vroom, V., & Yetton, P. (1973). *Leadership and decision-making*. London: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Walton, R. E., & Hackman, R. J. (1986). Groups under contrasting management strategies. In P. S. Goodman (Ed.), *Designing effective work groups* (pp. 168–201). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Winn, M. I., & Keller, L. R. (1999). Harnessing complexity, idiosyncrasy and time: modeling methodology for corporate multi-stakeholder decisions. In D. J. Wood and D. Windsor (Eds.), *International Association for Business and Society 1999 proceedings of tenth annual conference held in Paris, France*, pp. 482–487.
- Winn, M. I., & Keller, L. R. (2001). A modeling methodology for multi-objective multi-stakeholder decisions: Implications for research. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 10, 166–181.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely-coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 1–19.
- Weick, K. E. (2001). *Making sense of the organization*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.