



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Find the Core of an Idea

To strip an idea down to its core, we must be masters of exclusion. We must relentlessly prioritize. Saying something short is not the mission—sound bites are not the ideal. Proverbs are the ideal. We must create ideas that are both simple and profound.

—Chip Heath and Dan Heath

H. L. MENCKEN once observed that “0.8 percent of the human race is capable of writing something that is instantly understandable.” As a leader and as someone who has worked closely with countless school and system leaders over many years to promote their clarity, I know that stripping an idea to its core so that others can truly understand and remember it is an incredibly demanding task. In fact, it is such an intellectually demanding task that some leaders actively avoid it. And when they avoid it, their lack of clarity more often than not dooms to failure the innovations they seek to implement.

As Chip Heath and Dan Heath point out in *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, the “curse of knowledge” can make it difficult for leaders to communicate their understanding to others. “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it

was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.” (p. 20)

The mind that truly understands the complexity of an idea is often the one that is most challenged in finding its core. Sometimes the challenge is separating what is important from what is marginal or peripheral. Other times the challenge is finding concrete language and images to describe abstract ideas, particularly when those ideas are originally acquired in the form of educational jargon.

Writing, I believe, is a fundamental process for establishing clarity. It usually takes several drafts to strip away the less important elements to find the proverb-like core. Sustained, dialogue-like conversation is another aid to clarity. Listening to ourselves speak or noting others’ reactions often reveals gaps in our understanding or logical inconsistencies. I encourage leaders at every level to make the time to find the core of the ideas that animate their work. Doing so is essential if they are to lead through learning.

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