

# THE FEARLESS SCHOOL LEADER: MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS



CYNTHIA MCCABE



Cynthia McCabe is an accomplished educational leader. She grew up in east Baltimore and is married. Experiencing fear while stuck in a house fire at a young age gives her a firsthand experience in dealing

with intense fear. She has worked in the state of Maryland over her career.

She has an impressive resume, including Director of Elementary Schools in Carrol County, Maryland, classroom teacher, resource specialist, assistant principal, principal, supervisor of curriculum and instruction, adjunct instructor at Towson University, as well as supervising administrative interns. She has also taught classes on educational leadership.

Her passion is to “improve the effectiveness of public schools, enabling students to successfully pursue their professional callings” (p. xiii).

## Book Summary

School leaders are called to make important decisions that affect students and staff daily. Cynthia McCabe offers practical insights into conquering fears and making the right decisions to affect student learning. McCabe explains how we can understand the bases of fear and work through our emotions to improve the greater concern. Setting intentions, outlining expectations and creating positive energy are examples of leading staff and students to success. McCabe offers authentic strategies and aligns them with daily examples. “The Fearless School Leader: Making the Right Decision” prepares its audience to create a positive, stable, rigorous working environment by making difficult decisions and by having difficult conversations.

# THE BRAIN

## NEW INFORMATION

Neuroscientists have identified three brains:

- NEW BRAIN **thinks**: processes rational data
- MIDDLE BRAIN **feels**: processes emotions and gut feelings
- OLD BRAIN **decides**: takes into account information from other brains, but old brain triggers the decision

The EMOTIONS OF THE MIDDLE BRAIN dominate our thinking.

“Emotions are basic and more dominant. Remember we feel before we think, and those reactions are subconscious, immediate and inescapable” (p. 4)

Our old brain is on the lookout for anything that will threaten us.

Fear is our body’s way of alerting us to something that may hurt us, either emotionally or physically.



# THE PROBLEM: FEAR

*Our greatest need beyond food/water/shelter is the need for self-worth.*

*Our subconscious needs are partnered with corresponding fears:*

## Two Types of Fear

- Mortal fear : fear of physical harm
- Emotional fear: fear of harm to the ego

## Need for Mastery vs. Fear of Failure

- Afraid of failing at whatever life throws at you
- The need for mastery pushes us to take risks and to accomplish great things

## Need for Respect vs. Fear of Judgment

- The need for respect meets our need to maintain a good reputation
- Pushes us to act in an ethical manner
- Fear of judgment can prevent us from making the right decisions

## Need for Sense of Meaning and Purpose vs. Fear of Purposelessness

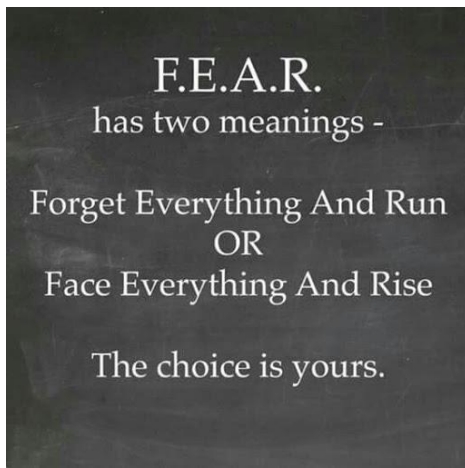
- People want their work to give their lives direction
- Purposelessness can steal our joy for our work

## Need for Acceptance vs. Fear of Rejection

- The need to be accepted by others, to fit in, and to belong
- The need for acceptance is the most dangerous in the workplace
- Giving in to this fear stifles creativity and limits people's contributions

## FEAR

- GRIPS US
- STOPS US FROM CONFRONTING A PROBLEM
- DISABLES US IN MAKING A DECISION
- MAKES US AVOID OPPORTUNITIES
- CAUSES US TO ATTACK PEOPLE WITH WHOM WE SHOULD BE ALIGNING
- CAUSES CAUTIOUS DECISION MAKING, NOT TIMELY DECISION MAKING



## THE SOLUTION: FEARLESS DECISIONS

### Lower vs. Higher Concerns

- Our emotional and physical needs are **lower concerns** – they directly affect us.
- Concerns that have an outward focus – put someone else’s needs above our own are **higher concerns**.
- We need to make a conscious commitment to higher concerns.
- **The shift moves from individual needs to what is best for student achievement.**

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***ATTENTION:** What you think about and talk about is what you get. Give your **INTENTION** attention! Block out unproductive thoughts.*

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### RESISTANT THOUGHTS

- Avoid negative untruths
- Emotions affect thoughts and thoughts affect emotions
- Break the cycle—identify thoughts that are causing negative feelings

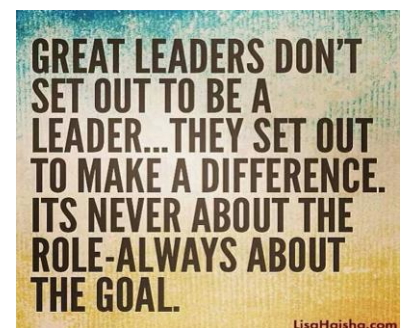
### FACE YOUR FEARS

- Don’t succumb to resistant thoughts—choose to make a fearless decision
- Choose the higher concern
- Move forward with confidence

### BUILD TRUST

## INTENTIONS

- What is your goal as an educator?
- Set your intention.
- Talk about it every day.
- Think about it every day.
- Act on it every day.
- Maintain a laser-like focus.
- Make your intentions clear.
- Create clear expectations on how to achieve the intention shared.
- Communicate your intention to everyone.



### Support Teachers

- 1. Get in the trenches**
  - Formal and informal conversations
  - Get into classrooms
  - Observe implementation of new strategies
  - Have a plan for appropriate next steps
- 2. Protect Teachers’ Time**
  - Find ways to streamline administrative tasks
  - Find school time to collaborate, analyze, and plan
- 3. Encourage Teachers to Keep a Healthy Balance between Home and School**
  - Teachers need to work a reasonable work day or they become resentful

- Consistency and sincerity create trust
- To earn trust, you must offer trust

#### BE WHO YOU ARE

- Be real and authentic
- Admit when you don't know

#### OPEN COMMUNICATION

- Be willing to speak about uncomfortable topics

## BIG IDEAS:

### BECOMING A FEARLESS LEADER

- We must surround ourselves with colleagues who share a dedication to achieving results above all else and accept diverse needs.
- You can overcome your brain wiring as well as emotions and habits in order to flourish. p. 18
- Conflict for the sake of conflict is not wise or healthy and will not help better your school. p. 32
- A belief is a thought you think over and over. p. 22
- All you need is a core of competent teachers to live out your intention. p. 50
- Low expectations = Low disappointment
- It is important for people to know that they can handle conflict.
- Great schools set hard and fast goals the whole school must strive to obtain! p. 89



# COURAGE

is not the absence of fear  
but the acquired ability  
to move beyond fear.

## Fearless Decision #1

### Dealing with Conflict

PROBLEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We are afraid of emotional pain and will avoid conflict for self preservation. We want to feel good about ourselves and people like us.</li><li>• Need for respect vs. fear of judgment—we are afraid someone will think we don't know what we are talking about</li><li>• Need for acceptance vs. fear of rejection—we care more about being liked than about making the right decision for students and staff</li></ul>
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The solution: develop the courage to welcome healthy conflict</li></ul>
SET YOUR INTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think of your intention</li><li>• Recognize the fear, don't run from it; reframe your thinking—it is healthy communication</li><li>• Conflict is an opportunity to grow your organization</li><li>• 3 Cs COURTESY – CONFLICT – COHESIVENESS</li></ul>
FIND YOUR VOICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Find the courage to tell the truth</li><li>• Start with small conversations that you are passionate about</li><li>• Be present in everyday conversations</li></ul>

<p>BUILD TRUST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a positive mindset towards conflict—it is a tool for growth</li> <li>• Demonstrate a willingness to engage in conflict to work towards change and growth</li> <li>• Commit to being directly involved with staff in times of strife; be in it with them and be positive</li> <li>• Be willing to change</li> </ul>
<p>CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeal to old brain first—avoiding conflict to avoid pain</li> <li>• Gain—transform the environment to welcome different opinions and ideas</li> <li>• Assure staff they will be heard—you won't hide when conflict arises</li> <li>• Different ideas strengthen and energize the organization</li> </ul>
<p>TAKE ACTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be courageous</li> <li>• Don't avoid difficult situations</li> <li>• Start small</li> <li>• Short-term uncomfortable creates long-term gain</li> <li>• Don't tolerate unacceptable behaviour</li> <li>• Don't allow cliques to control school dynamics</li> </ul>



## Fearless Decision #2

### Taking Action to Impact Student Learning

PROBLEM	<p>Paralysis by Analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Too much data—too little time</li></ul> <p>The Indecisive School Improvement Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Data are shared, but no root problem is identified</li><li>• Nobody steps up with a solution</li></ul> <p>The School Improvement Dissertation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Too many goals so focus is scattered</li></ul>
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The solution: develop the courage to take action</li></ul>
SET YOUR INTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think of your intention</li><li>• Accept that you may not achieve the outcome you want</li><li>• Trying something new is hopeful and inspiring</li><li>• Create a one-page improvement plan</li></ul>
FIND YOUR VOICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build expertise together</li><li>• Empower teacher leaders</li></ul>
BUILD TRUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work through the process collaboratively</li><li>• Everyone succeeds or fails together; if it fails, use it as a lesson</li><li>• Support staff in their attempts</li></ul>
CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sell your idea to staff with excitement; get them excited about trying something new</li><li>• Identify the pain—having students not make gains</li><li>• Gain—show how students will benefit from changing practice</li><li>• Need for respect—increase teachers' risk tolerance</li><li>• Recognize the fear of judgment, of making mistakes, and of not doing it right</li></ul>
TAKE ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Give the School Improvement Team legitimate authority</li><li>• Keep the focus on student achievement</li><li>• Write a short, focused school improvement plan</li><li>• Hold the team accountable for increased academic achievement</li></ul>

## Fearless Decision #3

### Acknowledging Standardized Test Results

<p>PROBLEM</p> <p>Teachers think. . .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assessments are devoid of rigour<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ If this is so, only students who achieve 100% should be of concern</li></ul></li><li>• Assessments fail to measure what is important to teach in schools<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Not all schools view academic achievement as the primary reason to be in school</li></ul></li><li>• It is unfair to expect our lower performing students to pass state/standardized assessments<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Worried about weaker students being set up for failure</li></ul></li></ul>
<p>SOLUTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop the courage to acknowledge standardized assessment data</li></ul>
<p>SET YOUR INTENTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think of your intention</li><li>• View data as neutral information</li><li>• Use the data to pinpoint your actions</li></ul>
<p>FIND YOUR VOICE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build expertise together—take the staff through unpacking the curriculum and aligning it to the state/standardized tests</li><li>• Examine and understand the data together—connect the results to future actions</li></ul>
<p>BUILD TRUST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build capacity in your instructional leaders</li><li>• Develop an understanding with the leaders regarding the imperative of high student achievement</li></ul>
<p>CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify the pain—poor public image, perceived increased workload</li><li>• Gain—workload will not increase, but teaching will change</li></ul>
<p>TAKE ACTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use the data to find the red flags</li><li>• Plan to measure the impact of the actions that teachers will choose</li><li>• Plan a strategic action to address the specific area of weakness</li><li>• Act on the information</li></ul>

## Fearless Decision #4

### Holding Teachers Accountable for Student Achievement

PROBLEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Administrators are afraid to tell teachers they are not meeting standards or they are evaluating the wrong thing</li><li>• Teachers are rewarded for the daily process they go through and not the outcomes they achieve</li><li>• It is difficult for principals to be honest about teacher effectiveness</li><li>• Principals want colleagues to be happy with them as their leaders</li><li>• Leaders feel bad about telling hard-working teachers that they are ineffective and need to change their practices</li></ul>
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The solution: develop courage by empowering teachers—hold them accountable for student achievement</li></ul>
SET YOUR INTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change your focus from concern for yourself to the higher concern for student achievement</li></ul>
BUILD TRUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shared accountability</li><li>• Administrators and teachers together make a plan and monitor the data</li><li>• Acknowledge the uncontrollables</li><li>• Teachers cannot be expected to do the impossible</li></ul>
CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pain—teachers lack empowerment</li><li>• Changing the culture means empowering teachers—big gain</li><li>• The big focus is student learning—everything else is secondary; clear teachers' plates as much as possible</li><li>• Give teachers instructional freedom to choose their strategies</li></ul>
TAKE ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Plan—do—study—act</li><li>• See it—own it—solve it—do it</li><li>• Implement pacing conferences; discuss, closely analyze, and respond to student learning<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Step 1—Communicate current instructional levels<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Red flag students at risk</li></ul></li><li>Step 2—Set goals for each student<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each student must make one year's growth</li></ul></li><li>Step 3—Backward-mapping the year<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work backwards for each quarter of the year to determine where students should be</li><li>• Determine assessments along the way</li></ul></li><li>Step 4—Discuss student progress toward goals<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Principal meets with individual teachers/grade level teams to check on progress</li><li>• Shared accountability—what do the teachers need to move forward?</li></ul></li></ul></li></ul>



## Fearless Decision #5

### Holding High Expectations for Student Achievement

PROBLEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lowering rigour—lowering the academic expectations to ensure success</li><li>• Inflating grades—giving good marks on the report card but students fail or significantly struggle on the state-wide/standardized assessments</li><li>• Teacher self-doubt—teachers doubting their abilities</li></ul>
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make a fearless decision—hold high expectations for all students throughout the school</li></ul>
SET YOUR INTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take inventory—what are your (the administrator’s) true beliefs?</li><li>• Acknowledge the bad and the ugly (your negative thoughts)—they probably came at a high stress time in your career</li><li>• Move past the negative—focus on good times in your career</li><li>• Consider the possibilities—hold high expectations and imagine what that would look like</li></ul>
BUILD TRUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Principal-to-teacher—ride out the storm together; resist the urge to go back to the way things were</li><li>• Teacher-to-teacher—share expertise with special educators</li></ul>
CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pain—fear of failure</li><li>• Gain—sense of mastery, sense of purpose</li><li>• Share evidence of schools exhibiting success</li></ul>
TAKE ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Examine current rigour within the School—look at the state and district assessments<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Does the report card match the assessments?</li></ul></li><li>• Examine grading practices—ask teachers to share their grading practices; establish consistency</li><li>• Create an effective instructional support team Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Put the right people on the team—invested, attend, participate, specialists, teachers, guidance counselor, assistant principal</li><li>○ The team is accountable for achievement</li><li>○ Don’t spend too much time identifying the problem</li><li>○ Allow goals that are not all academic</li><li>○ Follow up</li></ul></li></ul>

Fearless Decision #6  
Prioritizing Results Over Ideology

PROBLEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rival ideologies—clashes over pedagogy (new math vs. old math)</li> <li>• Groupthink—a group of teachers adhering to one way of teaching at all costs</li> </ul>
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the courage to prioritize results over ideology</li> </ul>
SET YOUR INTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritize results</li> <li>• What are the strengths and weaknesses to your ideology? Try new strategies</li> <li>• Find a Mentor-support inside or outside of your district; visit and watch new strategies first hand</li> <li>• Mentors should be independent thinkers, results-driven, courageous, and willing to invest in others</li> </ul>
BUILD TRUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lay the groundwork for flexible thinking</li> <li>• Attitude of nonjudgment</li> <li>• No one is considered a bad teacher for trying something new</li> </ul>
CAMPAIGN AND SHOW CLEAR CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine how teachers are treating each other</li> <li>• Pain—are teachers frustrated/exhausted?</li> <li>• Gain—examine data; determine collaboratively if changes are needed</li> </ul>
TAKE ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructure the way time is used in the building—focus on achievement</li> <li>• Monthly School Improvement Team meeting—student achievement is the only item on the agenda</li> <li>• Faculty meetings—give teachers at the same grade levels time to collaborate</li> <li>• Team meetings—only on activities to increase student learning</li> <li>• Substitute time—give teachers time to work/plan/think</li> </ul>

## QUOTATIONS FOR MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS

Quotation	Makes Me Think
“We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think” (p. 16)	<i>That we need to keep our emotions in check when dealing with others.</i>
“We feel before we think, and those reactions are subconscious, immediate and inescapable” (p. 4)	<i>I need to make sure that my emotions do not take over my thinking.</i>
“Fear causes cautious decision making when we are weary of the outcome” (p. 4)	<i>We don't want to make a decision that may fail so we make no decision.</i>
“[Fear] it can also stop us from making decisions in a timely fashion” (p. 5)	<i>Momentum is important. We can't let fear waste valuable time and tempo.</i>
“If we allow fear of judgment to handcuff our decision making, then we are sentenced to a professional life of walking on egg shells” (p. 9)	<i>I do not want to walk on egg shells . . . short-term pain (uncomfortable) for long-term gain.</i>
“Worry is a form of attention” (p. 21)	<i>We are giving life to our fears . . . actually making them come to fruition.</i>
“The most successful leaders have continuous, honest, internal dialogue” (p. 33)	<i>I need to be honest with myself—rechecking my intentions daily/monthly/yearly</i>
“The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm which is not easily disturbed” (p. 35)	<i>I had not thought of this. A calm, secure environment is worth the conflict.</i>
“Our greatest need is having worth or value as a person” (p. 5)	<i>My biggest fear is people thinking I am not good at my roles.</i>

<p>“A leader who insists on positive behaviour gains respect, while a leader who ignores negative behaviour loses respect” (p. 11)</p>	<p><i>It is worth the trouble long term to have those difficult conversations.</i></p>
<p>“When you focus on everything, you will end up focusing on nothing” (p. 48)</p>	<p><i>Choose your intention carefully.</i></p>
<p>“Every profession uses objective measures to determine effectiveness. Educators don’t like the results of their tests, so they condemn the measure. But only a poor working man quarrels with his tools” (p. 61)</p>	<p><i>We need to use our assessment tools not only as measures of accountability, but as tools to help us change/reform/continue our current practices.</i></p>

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