

Coffee With the Custodian Leadership Study Guide

Coffee With the Custodian is more than a story.

It's a mirror, a challenge, and a conversation starter.

Every chapter reminds us: Leadership isn't what you do. It's what you build in others.

You've walked through twenty-five chapters of presence, trust, and connection, but insight alone doesn't create change. Action does.

Now it's your turn.

This guide turns the story into strategy. It's built for instructional leaders, campus administrators, and district teams who want to move beyond positional authority and lead through presence, trust, and human connection.

However you use it, lead where you are.

Lead with presence. Lead with purpose.

The best leaders don't try to do everything; instead, they bring out the best in everyone around them.

So go and leave every person better than you found them.

How to Use This Study Guide

The *Coffee With the Custodian* study guide is a leadership road map designed for reflection, coaching, and transformation. This guide helps you take the story off the page and into your school by aligning each chapter with the ten coffee conversation themes of transformational leadership (see page 130), a signature framework rooted in trust, presence, and culture. You can visit go.SolutionTree.com/leadership to access a reproducible version of this study guide.

This guide's purpose is to help you build the kind of leadership culture people want to follow—one grounded in trust, fueled by relationships, and sustained by shared ownership.

By the end of this guide, you'll have translated each principle into specific, sustainable habits for your team. The goal isn't more meetings—it's more meaning in the meetings you already lead.

When you're done, you won't just understand the book.

You'll live it.

What's Inside Each Chapter

The study guide for each chapter contains the following.

- ◆ A **theme** drawn from the coffee conversations—your leadership anchor
- ◆ A **leadership truth** to spark reflection and focus the room
- ◆ A **leadership insight** breaking down the deeper meaning of the moment
- ◆ A **leadership lens** with specific tips for principals, assistant principals, and coaches
- ◆ **Reflection questions** to use individually or as a team
- ◆ A “**try this**” prompt for immediate leadership action
- ◆ A **system-level application** for district leaders and decision-makers
- ◆ A **professional development strategy** so you can turn insight into momentum

Ways to Use This Guide

This guide can be used by individuals, teams, coaching partnerships, cohorts, and more.

Solo Reflection

- ◆ Read one chapter per week and journal your reflections using the questions provided.
- ◆ Set one goal based on the “try this” prompt and track your growth.
- ◆ Use the coffee conversations framework to shape your leadership philosophy.

Leadership Team Book Study

- ◆ Meet weekly and assign one or two chapters at a time.
- ◆ Let team members take turns facilitating discussion using the reflection questions and professional development strategies.
- ◆ Use the themes to start hard conversations on trust, control, burnout, and more.

Staff Development

- ◆ Begin staff meetings with a leadership truth or a “try this” prompt to spark reflection.
- ◆ Run a ten-week study around the ten coffee conversations for new or aspiring leaders.
- ◆ Use key scenes to start conversations about connection, clarity, and presence.

Coaching and Mentoring

- ◆ Use the leadership lens to guide assistant principals, deans, or teacher leaders.
- ◆ Set up one-on-one conversations around each chapter’s insight.
- ◆ Use the reflection questions to dig beneath the surface.
- ◆ Reflect together on how to apply the system-level application to real decisions.

Retreats and Workshops

- ◆ Build breakout sessions around each of the ten coffee conversations.
- ◆ Break the chapters into sessions and let each leader own one.
- ◆ Use quotes, insights, and “try this” prompts as session starters.
- ◆ Close each session by asking, “How will we lead differently tomorrow?”

The power of this guide is in the conversation it creates—with yourself, your team, and your culture. Use it with intention. Revisit it often.

Because leadership isn’t a checklist.

It’s a presence.

The Ten Coffee Conversation Themes of Transformational Leadership

These ten conversations form the core of *Coffee With the Custodian*.

Each conversation reveals a lesson Dr. Harper learned and a truth Loyd modeled. Together, they show that leadership ability deepens through relationships that grow trust, purpose, and shared ownership. Every conversation marks a shift from survival to significance.

The moments in this story were drawn from real schools, real leaders, and real experiences, including the story of Ginger the service dog. Each theme captures what happens when leaders choose connection, consistency, and care in the middle of everyday challenges. These lessons were lived long before they were written.

Use these conversations to reflect, coach, and grow. Let them guide you toward greater clarity, stronger trust, and a culture that lasts.

The goal is simple: Help leaders create communities where trust is visible, growth is shared, and every person—adult and student alike—has the opportunity to thrive.

1 **Build Trust in the Margins**

If leadership is a trust account, your deposits must outlast your mistakes.

Forget initiatives. Trust is your greatest asset, and it's built when no one's looking. Consistency in hard moments is what earns respect.

Professional development focus: Where in your leadership have you made trust deposits this month?

2 **Get Out of the Office and Into the Culture**

You're not just reading the room—you're setting the tone. And you can't do that if you're not *in* the room.

Leadership isn't surveillance. It's presence. You must be where culture lives—hallways, classrooms, and quiet corners.

Professional development focus: Where are you most present—and where are you most absent?

3 **Connect, Don't Control**

The strongest leadership isn't about holding on tighter—it's about holding people closer.

Leaders who lead through fear get compliance. Leaders who lead through connection build commitment. The difference? Trust outlasts mandates.

Professional development focus: What systems have you built to connect—not just control?

4 **Put RQ Over IQ**

Relational intelligence isn't a bonus skill. It's *the* skill.

You can't lead people you don't understand. RQ is what keeps people engaged, resilient, and inspired when the job gets hard.

Professional development focus: What are you doing weekly to raise your RQ with staff?

5 **Stop Fixing, Start Valuing**

People don't need to be fixed. They need to feel valued.

Your staff doesn't need perfection. They need to know they matter. Listening trumps solving. Affirmation beats evaluation.

Professional development focus: Who needs to feel valued right now—and hasn't?

☺
6 ☺ **Multiply—Don't Shoulder**

If it all depends on you, you're not leading a team—you're carrying one.

Let go of hero leadership. Build capacity. Develop your people. That's how schools outlast burnout and leaders leave legacies.

.....
Professional development focus: What leadership responsibilities are you holding too tightly?

☺
7 ☺ **Protect the Culture**

Culture isn't shaped by big events. It's shaped by what you allow every day.

Negativity doesn't explode. It leaks—through sarcasm, gossip, and silence. Strong leaders protect culture in the moments that seem too small to matter because those moments are where trust lives or dies.

.....
Professional development focus: What small behaviors or habits are you currently allowing that could weaken your culture if left unaddressed?

☺
8 ☺ **Draw It Out—Don't Take It On**

You don't need to carry every piece. You just need to know who's holding what.

Stop trying to prove yourself. Start noticing the quiet leaders in the room. Empower them to own the mission.

.....
Professional development focus: Who on your team is ready to lead but hasn't been asked?

☺
9 ☺ **Mirror What Matters**

What you reflect, your staff will repeat.

Culture isn't built through declarations. It's built through demonstration. People model what they see—not what they're told.

.....
Professional development focus: What behavior do you want your team to replicate? Are you demonstrating it?

☺
10 ☺ **Build What Outlasts You**

Real leadership leaves people better than you found them.

Your title reflects your past. Your legacy reflects your impact. You're no longer just a doer. You're a builder.

.....
Professional development focus: If you left tomorrow, what would remain because of you?

Chapter 1: Just Keeping the Seat Warm



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build What Outlasts You

Leadership Truth

“I refuse to just hold the seat. I am here to build.”

Leadership Insight

Many leaders are hired to maintain, not transform. But real leadership begins when you refuse to just keep the seat warm and instead start carrying the weight of culture. The first step is not knowing everything—it’s choosing to be present.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Lead even if the position feels temporary. People follow consistency, not titles.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Your leadership doesn’t begin when you’re promoted. It begins when you show up.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Be the steady voice in unstable systems. Stability builds trust.

Reflection Questions

1. What does “just keeping the seat warm” look like in your school or district?
2. Where are you maintaining instead of leading?
3. How does consistency build trust?

Try This

Identify one area where your leadership has been reactive. Show up early. Lead with intention.

System-Level Application

What structures support interim or emergency leaders so they can do more than survive?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What is one way you have chosen leadership over maintenance?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does it look like to lead before you’re fully ready?

Chapter 2: The First Cup



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build Trust in the Margins

Leadership Truth

“Trust starts with a cup of coffee and my full attention.”

Leadership Insight

Leadership starts with presence, not plans. Dr. Harper didn’t launch with a vision statement—she brought coffee. Trust begins when people feel seen, not surveyed. Your first move sets the tone for the next hundred.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Trust is earned before policies are introduced.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Start by sitting with—not speaking at—staff.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Don’t lead with answers. Lead with questions and shared space.

Reflection Questions

1. How do small, informal moments build trust?
2. When was the last time you intentionally sat with your staff—without an agenda?
3. What’s your version of “the first cup”?

Try This

Schedule fifteen minutes this week to connect with someone you haven’t yet built trust with. No task. Just time.

System-Level Application

What non-evaluative time is structured into leadership schedules so you can simply be present?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What is a moment when someone earned your trust without trying?
- ◆ **Discussion:** How do you make trust deposits throughout your week?

Chapter 3: The List



Coffee Conversation Theme

Get Out of the Office and Into the Culture

Leadership Truth

“Leadership doesn’t start with fixing things; it starts with seeing what is worth saving.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper didn’t make a to-do list. She made a to-see list. She started by identifying the people who shaped the school’s soul. Good leadership isn’t about what you fix—it’s about who you know.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Know the culture carriers on your campus. Start with them.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Who influences the building beyond titles?
- ◆ **Coaches:** Don’t evaluate—observe. Listen. Learn.

Reflection Questions

1. Who are the relational leaders in your building?
2. How well do you really know the staff who influence culture?
3. What would your “first five” list of people to connect with look like today?

Try This

Walk your building tomorrow with no clipboard. Stop and connect with five staff members you’ve barely spoken to.

System-Level Application

How can schools support leaders in prioritizing relational mapping, not just task tracking?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Small group:** Compare your lists of culture carriers.
- ◆ **Discussion:** How can noticing others change your leadership?

Chapter 4: A Paper Jam



Coffee Conversation Theme
Put RQ Over IQ

Leadership Truth

“An effective leader doesn’t have to command the room—just connect with it.”

Leadership Insight

Great leadership doesn’t come from having all the answers. It comes from showing up grounded. Dr. Harper realized that vulnerability doesn’t make you weak; it makes you real. Trust isn’t earned through perfection but through presence.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Start by owning what you don’t know. That builds more trust than pretending.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Curiosity is more powerful than confidence. Model it.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Transparency paves the way for deeper growth.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you tried to prove your worth instead of standing in it?
2. What does authentic vulnerability look like in your leadership role?
3. What’s one thing you don’t know but are willing to ask about?

Try This

In your next staff meeting, model one thing you’re curious or unsure about. Invite your team to help shape the answer.

System-Level Application

How does your leadership culture support admitting uncertainty as a strength—not a flaw?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** When was a moment you chose vulnerability—and what happened next?
- ◆ **Discussion:** Why is authenticity magnetic in leadership?

Chapter 5: The Thermostat



Coffee Conversation Theme
Mirror What Matters

Leadership Truth

“Anyone can reflect a room. Leaders set the tone.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper didn't need to match the energy in the building—she needed to shape it. Great leaders regulate culture like a thermostat, not just measure it like a thermometer. The mood of the school often mirrors the presence of its leaders.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Set the tone through calm clarity.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Don't take on others' stress—help stabilize it.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Regulate first. Then lead.

Reflection Questions

1. How does your emotional presence impact the room?
2. Where do you need to shift from reacting to regulating?
3. What temperature are you setting on your team?

Try This

Before any tough conversation, pause and check your own temperature. Regulate before you respond.

System-Level Application

What supports exist for leaders to manage emotional labor and resilience?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Self-assessment:** Are you more thermometer or thermostat?
- ◆ **Challenge:** Name three ways to reset team culture this week.

Chapter 6: No Such Thing as a Team of One



Coffee Conversation Theme
Multiply—Don't Shoulder

Leadership Truth

“Sometimes the strongest thing you can do is not try to carry it all yourself.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper began to realize leadership feels loneliest when you're holding everything yourself. But leadership isn't about being the hero. It's about building a team that can carry the weight together.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Delegation isn't weakness—it's wisdom.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** You can lead from the middle by sharing the load.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Great leaders lift others—not carry them.

Reflection Questions

1. Where have you been carrying too much alone?
2. Who on your team needs to be empowered to lead?
3. What part of the load are you willing to release?

Try This

Choose one task or responsibility to delegate this week. Follow up with support and trust.

System-Level Application

How do district expectations support leaders in building distributed leadership models?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What are you carrying alone that someone else could help carry?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What's the difference between delegation and development?

Chapter 7: The Strength in the Room



Coffee Conversation Theme

Draw It Out—Don't Take It On

Leadership Truth

“There’s strength in this room—you just have to stop trying to hold it all.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper began noticing the quiet strengths of her team. Real leadership is about recognizing the talents around you and making space for them to shine.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Ask yourself—Who are the unspoken leaders in your building?
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Speak up for those who haven’t yet spoken.
- ◆ **Coaches:** You don’t need the spotlight to lead—shine it on others.

Reflection Questions

1. Who in your building holds strength but not a title?
2. How do you create space for staff gifts to surface?
3. What’s your plan to draw out—not take on—leadership?

Try This

Identify one staff member this week whose strength has gone unseen. Celebrate it publicly.

System-Level Application

What are your systems doing to surface hidden talent within the organization?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Share:** Name a colleague whose leadership you admire but isn’t often recognized.
- ◆ **Challenge:** Create a list of strengths in the room—and who’s holding them.

Chapter 8: A Moment of Change



Coffee Conversation Theme
Stop Fixing, Start Valuing

Leadership Truth

“People rise when they feel seen.”

Leadership Insight

One act of humility reshaped Dr. Harper’s entire view of leadership. Presence in overlooked moments is often what leaves the deepest legacy.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Great leaders don’t just make decisions, they make people feel seen.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Legacy isn’t built in front of a room; it’s built beside someone.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Your quiet choices speak volumes.

Reflection Questions

1. What small act of leadership impacted you the most?
2. How do you define your own leadership legacy?
3. Are your actions building people—or just checking boxes?

Try This

Write a thank-you note this week to someone who shaped your leadership.

System-Level Application

How does your system elevate servant leadership and emotional intelligence as core competencies?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What is a moment that changed you as a leader?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does humble leadership look like in action?

Chapter 9: Beyond Recognition



Coffee Conversation Theme
Mirror What Matters

Leadership Truth

“Real leaders are celebrated because they led, not because they left.”

Leadership Insight

We often wait to celebrate people until they're gone. But the best leaders recognize contributions now. Visibility and affirmation aren't extras—they are culture builders.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Celebrate people while they're in the room—not after.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Visibility is a leadership action.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Recognition reinforces purpose.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you celebrate leadership on your team?
2. Who deserves recognition but hasn't received it?
3. How can praise become part of your culture—not a special event?

Try This

Start your next meeting by naming something you've seen someone do well.

System-Level Application

How do your systems build ongoing recognition into the rhythm of the year?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Challenge:** Go on a three-day recognition streak.
- ◆ **Discussion:** What's the cost of unspoken praise?

Chapter 10: In the Middle of It All



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build What Outlasts You

Leadership Truth

“It’s not about being in charge. It’s about being in it with them.”

Leadership Insight

Your promotion reflects past success, but leadership is forward-facing. The job now is to build others, not prove yourself. Legacy leadership means people get better because of you—not because you’re around, but because of what you leave behind.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Build capacity every day.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Lead like you’ll hand it off tomorrow.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Pour in what outlasts you.

Reflection Questions

1. What’s your legacy project this year?
2. Who have you mentored intentionally in the last thirty days?
3. If you left tomorrow, what would remain because of you?

Try This

Make a list of three people you want to intentionally develop this semester.

System-Level Application

How are leaders held accountable not just for performance, but for developing people?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What do you want people to say after you’re gone?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does legacy building look like today?

Chapter 11: Leaders Worth Following



Coffee Conversation Theme
Connect, Don't Control

Leadership Truth

“Promotion proves your past. Presence shapes your future.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper realized that the title isn't the destination—it's the platform. Leadership isn't about doing more of what got you promoted. It's about shifting from performer to developer, from proving yourself to building others.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Your team needs a builder, not a boss.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** You're not climbing anymore—you're cultivating.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Lead like someone else's growth depends on it.

Reflection Questions

1. In what aspects of your leadership do you still prioritize your own performance or try to prove your own worth?
2. How do you measure your impact beyond outcomes?
3. What are you building that will outlast your presence?

Try This

Identify three ways you can develop capacity in others, then take action.

System-Level Application

Do evaluation systems reward building capacity or just personal performance?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** Why were you promoted? What do you now work to build?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What's the difference between doing the job and growing others to do it?

Chapter 12: Plans and Schedules



Coffee Conversation Theme

Get Out of the Office and Into the Culture

Leadership Truth

“My calendar serves the culture, not the other way around.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper stopped running her day off the calendar and started running it off the culture. Presence isn't just about being seen; it's about being felt, noticed, and trusted.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Schedule less. Show up more.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Put people over paperwork—every time.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Culture doesn't clock in. Neither should your care.

Reflection Questions

1. What pulls you away from where culture lives?
2. How do you create a margin for presence?
3. What part of the building have you not visited this week?

Try This

Start tomorrow by visiting three places you don't usually go before 9 a.m.

System-Level Application

How does your district empower leaders to prioritize presence over paperwork?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Calendar audit:** Where does your time go when compared to where your people are?
- ◆ **Discussion:** How do you show up without adding to your plate?

Chapter 13: Stories in Every Corner



Coffee Conversation Theme

Get Out of the Office and Into the Culture

Leadership Truth

“Every hallway is a chapter. I have to read them.”

Leadership Insight

Culture doesn't shift because of new policies; it shifts because someone is willing to get close to the people, the problems, and the potential. You don't need every answer. You need to know your people.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Every classroom visit is a leadership deposit.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** The better you know the pulse, the better you can support it.
- ◆ **Coaches:** The greatest strategy is observation with intention.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you really know about your staff's day-to-day work and lives?
2. Where have you relied too much on data and not enough on presence?
3. How would your leadership shift if you saw more than you emailed?

Try This

Visit five different classrooms this week and only observe relationships, not instruction.

System-Level Application

What leadership expectations prioritize visibility and relational presence?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What do you learn by seeing instead of asking?
- ◆ **Group reflection:** How do we create structures for real presence?

Chapter 14: The Quiet Ones



Coffee Conversation Theme
Mirror What Matters

Leadership Truth

“The quiet ones are watching. Let them see integrity.”

Leadership Insight

The culture you model becomes the culture they carry. The quiet ones—the staff who rarely speak in meetings, the students who never raise their hands—are watching the most closely. Lead for them.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** The tone you set becomes the tone they feel.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Consistency speaks louder than charisma.
- ◆ **Coaches:** You’re modeling even when you think you aren’t.

Reflection Questions

1. What do your smallest actions reflect?
2. Who’s watching who you haven’t noticed?
3. How does your tone shape trust?

Try This

Be intentionally consistent this week—same tone, same priorities, same people-first lens.

System-Level Application

What expectations do systems set for modeling values, not just delivering outcomes?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What is one way you lead when no one is looking?
- ◆ **Group reflection:** What tone are we setting through our daily actions?

Chapter 15: Adding Value



Coffee Conversation Theme
Stop Fixing, Start Valuing

Leadership Truth

“They don’t need solutions. They need to feel seen.”

Leadership Insight

Sometimes leadership is less about having answers and more about acknowledging effort. When leaders add value through presence, words, and visibility, people respond with trust and investment.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** You don’t need to solve everything. Just start with seeing people.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Presence often speaks louder than answers.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Affirmation is your greatest instructional tool.

Reflection Questions

1. Who feels invisible in your building?
2. Where could you shift from evaluating to affirming?
3. How does value building show up in your culture?

Try This

Write three quick handwritten affirmations this week. Drop them off in person.

System-Level Application

Do your systems prioritize people as much as they do performance?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Discussion:** Who added value to your week?
- ◆ **Challenge:** Make affirmation a part of your leadership rhythm.

Chapter 16: Balance and Boundaries



Coffee Conversation Theme
Multiply—Don't Shoulder

Leadership Truth

“Depleted leaders cannot build a healthy culture.”

Leadership Insight

Too often, leaders pour into everyone else while neglecting themselves. But burnout doesn't build trust—it breaks systems. In this chapter, Dr. Harper learned that rest isn't indulgent; it's essential. Leadership isn't about doing it all. It's about building others up. When you multiply, you sustain. When you shoulder it all, you eventually collapse.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Stop wearing exhaustion like it's a badge. Refill so you can pour.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Inventory what you carry—and what others can shoulder with you.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Your steadiness sets the tone. Protect it.

Reflection Questions

1. What parts of your leadership feel too heavy right now?
2. Who around you is ready to help but hasn't been invited in?
3. What boundaries will protect your energy before burnout begins?

Try This

Block one hour this week on your calendar for intentional recharging—then guard it like any critical meeting.

System-Level Application

What school or district practices actively model healthy boundaries for leadership? Are you rewarding sustainability or burnout?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** What responsibilities are you holding that someone else could own? What would it free up in you—and unlock in them?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does burnout look like *before* it becomes visible? How do you know when your team is running on empty?

Chapter 17: RQ Over IQ



Coffee Conversation Theme
Put RQ Over IQ

Leadership Truth

“I read the room before I try to lead it.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper realized that credibility doesn't come from knowing the most—it comes from connecting the deepest. Relationships are the foundation of influence. When leaders lead with empathy, teams lean in.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** RQ determines your reach.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** You don't need to impress—just invest.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Be the connector before the corrector.

Reflection Questions

1. How well do you know your team—not just their roles, but their stories?
2. What relational habits are you modeling?
3. What's one barrier keeping you from deeper connection?

Try This

Have one non-work conversation with a staff member each day this week.

System-Level Application

How does your school system support relational capacity building?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Connection map:** Chart who you're closest to—and who needs you more.
- ◆ **Quick write:** How does RQ show up in your leadership style?

Chapter 18: Protecting the Culture



Coffee Conversation Theme
Protect the Culture

Leadership Truth

“What I allow today, I endorse tomorrow.”

Leadership Insight

Culture doesn't crumble overnight. It erodes quietly when small behaviors go unchecked. Dr. Harper learned that leadership is less about confrontation and more about clarity. Protecting culture means speaking truth early, holding boundaries with care, and modeling the respect you expect.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Protecting culture starts with clear expectations and calm follow-through.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Address small issues before they become norms.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Model professional candor. Influence tone as much as instruction.

Reflection Questions

1. What small behaviors have begun to chip away at your culture?
2. When have you stayed silent and later wished you had spoken up?
3. How can you correct with both clarity and care?

Try This

This week, name one behavior that doesn't align with your values. Address it privately, directly, and respectfully. Follow up later to affirm growth, not guilt.

System-Level Application

Review your staff norms or shared agreements. Which expectations are still visible, and which have quietly faded? Revisit and recommit as a leadership team.

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Challenge:** Role-play a short conversation where you give constructive feedback or address a difficult topic using calm tone and clear words.
- ◆ **Discussion:** How do we hold one another accountable for protecting the culture?
- ◆ **Action step:** List three non-negotiables your team agrees to guard together.

Chapter 19: Showing Up With a Broom



Coffee Conversation Theme
Mirror What Matters

Leadership Truth

“She didn’t just lead with authority. She led by example.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper’s instinct to act, not order, transformed a tense moment into a teachable one. Leadership isn’t about directing from above; it’s about getting your hands dirty when it counts. Your staff will mirror what you model.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Every action sends a message. Make yours loud with humility.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Be seen doing what matters most.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Your broom might be figurative, but the message is the same.

Reflection Questions

1. What do your daily actions say about what matters?
2. When’s the last time you modeled servant leadership?
3. What job “beneath you” should you do this week?

Try This

Do one high-visibility, low-status task without announcing it.

System-Level Application

How do leaders across your system model culture through action?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Challenge:** Engage in a “grab the broom” moment—share it in your next meeting.
- ◆ **Discussion:** What’s something our staff needs to *see* us do?

Chapter 20: The Day the Rhythm Broke



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build Trust in the Margins

Leadership Truth

“One disruption. One moment. One opportunity to show up.”

Leadership Insight

Leadership isn't proven in the planned—it's revealed in the disrupted. When things fall apart, presence matters most. Dr. Harper's response to chaos showed that steadiness isn't about control but instead about consistency.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Stay calm when the rhythm breaks. Your team is watching.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Chaos is a cue to lead with grace.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Sometimes, your greatest support is your steady presence.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you show up when plans go off script?
2. What's one moment of disruption you wish you'd handled differently?
3. How does your presence build trust when things go wrong?

Try This

Next time there's a disruption, pause and then lead with calm and clarity.

System-Level Application

Does your district prepare leaders for presence—not just planning?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Debrief activity:** What did you learn from your last leadership disruption?
- ◆ **Discussion:** How can we train presence into our systems?

Chapter 21: When to Speak, When to Sweep



Coffee Conversation Theme
Connect, Don't Control

Leadership Truth

“Sometimes the room needs my voice. Sometimes it needs my silence.”

Leadership Insight

When tensions rise and conversations derail, true leadership isn't about asserting dominance. Instead, it's about knowing when to listen and when to redirect. Dr. Harper learned that speaking with intention and sweeping with humility keeps teams grounded and moving forward.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Hold space before holding court. Timing matters.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Learn to read the emotional current in a room.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Sweep the tension with presence, not power.

Reflection Questions

1. When was the last time your silence said more than your words?
2. What's your instinct when a conversation starts to spiral?
3. How do you balance voice and presence during conflict?

Try This

Next staff meeting, be the calm voice that recenters—not redirects.

System-Level Application

How are leaders supported in facilitating—not dominating—dialogue?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Practice:** Role-play interrupting a staff derailment with grace.
- ◆ **Discussion:** What's your go-to move when meetings turn tense?

Chapter 22: Not a Placeholder



Coffee Conversation Theme
Stop Fixing, Start Valuing

Leadership Truth

“I was asked to stay. I choose to lead.”

Leadership Insight

Dr. Harper was ultimately no longer defined by the qualifier of “interim,” but she learned that leadership isn’t about tenure, it’s about transformation. You don’t need the perfect start to make a lasting impact. When you value people, the role becomes permanent in its influence.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Own your presence, even if the role feels temporary.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Lead with how you show up, not what your badge says.
- ◆ **Coaches:** You’re not support staff—you’re a culture architect.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you underestimated your influence because of your role?
2. What actions show your team that they matter?
3. Who still needs to know they’re seen?

Try This

Write one handwritten note this week to a staff member who might feel invisible.

System-Level Application

How do systems ensure interim roles are empowered, not sidelined?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Quick write:** When did you feel valued beyond your title?
- ◆ **Team activity:** Celebrate silent strength in your building.

Chapter 23: The Lead Custodian



Coffee Conversation Theme
Draw It Out—Don't Take It On

Leadership Truth

“Real leadership is helping others see they already have it.”

Leadership Insight

True leadership isn't in doing everything. It's in drawing out greatness in others. Dr. Harper realized that Loyd, without a formal title, had been modeling leadership all along by empowering others to rise.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** You're not the hub of greatness. You're the release valve.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Look beyond your tasks. Who can you lift?
- ◆ **Coaches:** Point out leadership in the most unexpected places.

Reflection Questions

1. Who on your team has untapped leadership potential?
2. What tasks are you hoarding that could empower others?
3. Who empowered you before you had a title?

Try This

Delegate one responsibility this week with a statement of belief.

System-Level Application

Do your org charts reflect actual leadership or just hierarchy?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Mapping:** Identify informal leaders and their influence.
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does it look like to lead without a title?

Chapter 24: What You Build



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build What Outlasts You

Leadership Truth

“The work isn’t about one person. It’s about what remains when they leave.”

Leadership Insight

You were hired for what you could do. But you’ll be remembered for what you built. Dr. Harper learned that real leadership isn’t about being essential. It’s about becoming unnecessary. Legacy isn’t your presence. It’s what lasts in your absence.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Don’t build systems that depend on you. Build ones that develop others.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Stop climbing. Start cultivating.
- ◆ **Coaches:** The strongest leaders grow impact they’ll never be credited for—and that’s leadership.

Reflection Questions

1. If you stepped away tomorrow, what would keep going?
2. What parts of your culture or systems only work when *you* are involved?
3. Who are you actively mentoring to lead beyond you?

Try This

Choose four or five actions each week that move your mission forward. Write them down. Make them visible. And remember—they’re not extra. They *are* the work.

System-Level Application

What succession structures or mentorship tracks exist in your leadership pipeline? If they don’t exist, start one. Use the four or five mission-oriented actions to model how real alignment gets built week by week.

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Legacy map:** Have your team draw a simple road map. What do we want to be true of this school after we’re gone? Work backward from there. What needs to be planted today to make that true?
- ◆ **Team activity:** If you were gone tomorrow, what would you hope continues? What would collapse? What needs to change?
- ◆ **Optional add-on:** Have each leader share four to five mission-aligned goals for the week ahead.

Chapter 25: Better Than They Found It



Coffee Conversation Theme
Build What Outlasts You

Leadership Truth

“Leave people better than you found them.”

Leadership Insight

The final chapter isn't about accomplishments but presence. Dr. Harper didn't change the world overnight, but she did change her world by choosing people over ego, humility over recognition, and building over fixing.

Leadership Lens

- ◆ **Principals:** Presence is the new prestige.
- ◆ **Assistant principals:** Don't chase credit. Chase contribution.
- ◆ **Coaches:** Model being in it—with them.

Reflection Questions

1. Who are you becoming as a leader?
2. What legacy are you writing right now?
3. Whose life will echo your influence?

Try This

Send a note to someone who made you better, and tell them why.

System-Level Application

Does your leadership culture measure success by results or people?

Professional Development Strategy

- ◆ **Reflection activity:** Who's better because you led?
- ◆ **Discussion:** What does transformational leadership *feel* like?

Final Reflection

Leadership doesn't end with a story. It begins with you.

In the quiet, ordinary moments that follow, you'll have chances to notice what others overlook, to listen when it's easier to move on, to care when no one is watching.

The pages are finished, but your work isn't.

Keep showing up. Keep listening. Keep building something that lasts.

And wherever you lead, leave people better than you found them.