**The Bucket Rules**

**Living a Life that will Outlive You**

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Table of Contents

1. Running on Empty
2. The First Bucket Rule: Own Your Bucket
3. The First Step Forward
4. The Restart
5. Launch Day
6. The Second Bucket Rule: Fill Your Bucket
7. Increase Your Capacity
8. Empty
9. Overflowing
10. The Roll Out
11. Traction
12. The Third Bucket Rule: Carry Your Bucket
13. The Home Stretch
14. The Fourth Bucket Rule: Empty Your Bucket
15. Get Everyone Wet!
16. Breathe
17. Finish Strong
18. Rinse and Repeat
19. A Quick Review and a Challenge or Two

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book has been a lifetime in the making. To be honest, writing another book on leadership was not on my radar. I thoroughly enjoyed writing the first two: *The First Circle: Investing in Others in a Me-Centered World* which was followed by a more personal book: *The Cradle Maker: Learning to Lead Yourself First.*

One of the things that I have learned throughout my writing journey is that the importance of storytelling should never be overlooked. I love to create and tell a good story! Once I realized that I could do that with topics that don’t normally fall under the storytelling genre, I was hooked. I could marry two things that really matter to me: storytelling and leadership. That’s one of the reasons why writing *The Cradle Maker* was such a positive and powerful experience. After that experience, I figured I didn’t have anything new to say about leadership. At least not anything that I could weave into a good story and that wouldn’t trample on the concepts in *The Cradle Maker*.

It all started with a picture—a simple clip art, cartoonish-looking bucket. I don’t remember which email it was included with (probably a sales pitch of some kind), but for whatever reason, that picture found a home in the creative spaces of my brain. In what was honestly a matter of 10 to 15 minutes, the basic framework for this book was birthed. It was not even a complete skeleton, but I was certain that these bones could live. And they have!

My life has been blessed with a lot of people that I call bucket fillers. They have poured into my life in ways that I can’t even start to count. Some filled me long before I knew I was being filled. Some came along at just the right time. Others kept filling even when I didn’t want them to. But they’ve all had a great impact on my life. I flirted with the idea of listing the names of all of my bucket fillers but soon realized that it just wasn’t possible. There are too many! Isn’t that an awesome thing to be able to say? I also did not want to take the chance of leaving someone out, which I’m almost certain would have happened. But whether their names are listed or not, I am grateful for every one of them! My life has been so much richer because of their willingness to share their experiences with me!

Here’s some great news for you: You have bucket fillers in your life too! I want to encourage you to think about every person who has helped you along your journey. I bet some faces have already appeared in your mind, haven’t they? Remember these folks. If you have the opportunity, let them know how much you appreciate their presence in your life. And never forget that you have a lot of people in your life that you can help fill their buckets.

I hope that this short novel, *The Bucket Rules*, is as much a blessing to you as you read it as it was for me while I was writing it!

Dedication

I just don’t understand it. I really don’t. Seriously, how could an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-seeing God who knows my every deed, has heard my every thought and has witnessed my every mistake possibly still desire to use me in some way? I don’t know! But He does! I have known for a long time that I had the gift of words, being able to string powerful words together in ways that inspire and comfort. I know in my heart that this ability is a gift from God. There’s just no other way for me to explain it! I am so grateful to God for all of His blessings!

God has also given me a wife, Ali, who loves me unconditionally. For those of you who know me, you know how hard I can make that process. But she still loves me! And she supports me! She has been one of my biggest bucket fillers! I am a better person because of her. Ali, you are my joy! As much as I enjoy working with words, I simply can’t find adequate ones that describe how much I love you!

I think if I had been born in a stable, the Wise Men would have shown up bearing three gifts for me too—Katelynn, Emily, and Olivia—my precious three daughters! To say that these three have profoundly impacted my life is a tremendous understatement. Being a dad sometimes shows me how much I really know about life. But more often than not, it shows me how much I don’t know. My daughters are among my greatest teachers! I love you three so much!

1. Running on Empty

Stan Britton stared down the dark hallways of Oakview Elementary School. Like nearly every morning when he arrived at work, the sun hadn’t made an appearance yet and probably wouldn’t for another hour. Glancing at an old text, he made his way to his office door, fumbled with his keys, and stepped inside. The droning of the lights seemed louder than usual. The piles he had left on his desk the night before were still there. “This is not what I signed up for,” he whispered between sighs.

He dropped his briefcase on his overcrowded desk and started a fresh pot of coffee. While he waited he read back through the memos on his desk, commenting on each one. *Like I have time for this. You sure don’t remember what it’s like to be in this chair. Yeah, lady, your child is perfect. I’m just the idiot that runs this place.* It was going to be a long day.

“Good morning, Mr. Britton,” a voice boomed.

Stan looked over the top of his glasses. “Oh, hey, Walt.” He opened his briefcase, pulled out a report that was past due, and rubbed his eyes.”

“Looks like you’re going to have a busy day too,” Walt said.

“Is there any other kind?”

Walt leaned against his mop. “It’s the only kind I know. Besides, staying busy helps the time move a little faster.”

“Not fast enough,” Stan Britton offered.

Walt glanced at his watch. “Well, I’ll let you get back to work, Mr. Britton. Have a good day.”

Stan glanced at his head custodian and the mop and bucket in his hands. “Yeah, you too.”

Stan read through the latest test scores and attendance data for his campus. It wasn’t pretty. Attendance was down by almost two percentage points. Those two points represented thousands of lost dollars in funding. Reading and math scores were down again too. Third graders were barely at 50% passing. Teacher attendance wasn’t much better. The campus seemed to be in freefall and he didn’t know how to make it stop. One thing was certain, if he didn’t find some solutions soon, someone else would be the principal next year. His superintendent, Dr. Daniel Thornton, had all but said so during their last meeting.

Stan poured himself a cup of coffee and flipped through his planner. Grade level meetings until 11:00. Another meeting with Mrs. Perkins. Her daughter deserves to be in the GT program. She said so herself. Lunch duty if there’s time. Another meeting with Dr. Thornton to discuss the budget at 2:30. Car duty. Paperwork until who knows when. The day hadn’t even begun and he was already exhausted.

“Good morning, Mr. Britton,” his secretary, Gracie Porter, said.

Stan looked at his watch. “Why in the world are you here this early?”

Gracie Porter looked at her watch. “Why in the world are you here this early,” she said, and then added, “every single day?”

“Can’t you tell?” he said motioning towards the piles on his desk. “I’m not feeding it but it keeps on growing. This is about the only time of the day that I can get things accomplished. Once people start showing up it’s hard to get anything done.”

Gracie dug through her purse and pulled out her lipstick. “This job wouldn’t be half bad if it wasn’t for the people, huh?” she asked as she stared at her compact. “The piles aren’t going anywhere, but you are wearing yourself out. I can’t believe that Cindy is okay with you leaving so early and coming home so late every day.”

“She’s not okay with it, Gracie,” Stan said matter-of-factly. “But like I said, the piles aren’t getting any smaller. I’ll eventually get caught up and then things will be better.”

“Those three kids of yours need you more than this paperwork does, and—”

Gracie Porter had struck a nerve. Stan sighed loudly. “Gracie, I know what my wife needs. And I know what my kids need. What I need,” he said, his voice rising steadily, “is for you and everyone else to let me tend to my business. I’m sure you’ve got plenty to do.”

Gracie’s eyebrows shot straight up. “Fair enough, Mr. Britton. Just know that I’ve been here a long, long time. And I’ve seen what this job can do to a person up close. I’ve seen men lose their marriages. And you can say what you want but this job makes a lousy mistress, Mr. Britton. I’ve seen some men lose their kids. There was always going to be another game or another recital. But kids grow up fast. Sometimes too fast these days. Kids don’t stay kids for very long, Mr. Britton. And it’s so much harder to be a kid now than it was when we were growing up. Kids are full of questions. And they want and need answers. You’ve got to decide where they’re going to get those answers from, you or their friends?” Gracie bit her lip. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to watch a man die, Mr. Britton? Because I do! I watched a good man take his last breath right there,” she said pointing to the floor in front of her desk. “He was talking to me one minute, then he dropped some papers on my desk, asked me to file them, and took about two steps. The next thing I knew he was on the floor and gasping for air. The nurse tried everything she could,” Gracie said as she wiped the tears from her face. “I held that man’s hand until I felt his fingers go limp. He was gone before the ambulance could get here.” For a moment the only sound that could be heard was the ticking of the clock on the wall. “I don’t mean to get in your business, Mr. Britton,” Gracie said, breaking the silence, “but you’re headed down that same path and it ain’t taking you nearly as long to get there as it did the others. I can’t go through that again.”

Stan took a sip from his cup. “Look, Gracie, I didn’t mean to snap at you, but I’m really in a bind right now. I know I’m spending more time up here than I should. My wife reminds me of that constantly. I’ve missed my son’s last two football games. And my oldest daughter cried herself to sleep because I missed her piano recital. The baby just turned three. She’s usually asleep when I go to work and asleep when I get home. On top of all of that, Dr. Thornton is stressing me out with all of these meetings. The teachers don’t seem to want to do anything but complain. And the parents! They were bad enough in August, but this is nuts!”

“Yeah, it is,” Gracie sighed. “It also goes with the job. Maybe it’s not fair that you inherited this mess. The last three principals all said the same thing. But now it is your mess.”

“Yeah, I know. Dr. Thornton reminds me every chance he gets. I just wish he would’ve been a little more honest before he hired me.”

“You mean he lied to you?” Gracie asked.

“Well, maybe not lied the way we define it, but he sure didn’t tell me everything.”

“Like what?”

“Like how the achievement scores had been trending downward for years. All he said in the interview was that there was room for improvement. He just didn’t tell me how big the room was. He also didn’t mention that there were so many issues with the staff. He mumbled something about them being set in their ways, but nothing else. Gracie, some of these teachers can’t even stand each other! They really can’t! And what really amazes me is that they don’t even try to hide it! Some days it’s like being in junior high school again with a bunch of messy girls! And these parents! He sure never told me that they were so needy—about everything!”

Gracie nodded. “The scores are what they are. And the teachers aren’t bad people, they’re just—what’s the word I’m looking for? Human! That’s it. They’re just human. I know all about those messy girls. I’ve got two of my own, remember? And this won’t make you feel any better, but those messy girls from junior high usually turn out to be messy grownups. For some people, being messy is in their DNA. I’m not trying to excuse their behavior because a lot of it is plain foolishness to me. But they’re all grown women with their own list of grownup problems. They’re all stressed about different things and some of it hasn’t got a thing to do with work. Let’s see, what else? The parents? They are needy but I can see why. Their kids are struggling and no one seems to know what to do about it.” Gracie took a deep breath. “That’s why they hired you, Mr. Britton.”

1. Own Your Bucket

The pungent smell of sewage almost took Stan’s breath away as he entered the building the next morning. Walt was wringing out his mop. One of the hooks on his overalls dangled by his side. His face was dripping with sweat. He glanced at Stan when he heard the door open.

“Good morning, Mr. Britton. Plumbing backed up again. Almost got the line cleared.”

“Thanks, Walt. Is there anything we can do about the smell before the students arrive?”

Walt shook his head. “Not much. Maybe open a few windows. If the teachers run their air conditioners and keep their doors closed it should be okay. In a couple of hours, the smell should be gone.”

“Open their windows and run the air?” Stan asked. “At the same time?”

“In with the good, out with the bad,” Walt answered. “Just for a few hours. This ain’t my first rodeo when it comes to plumbing issues in this building, Mr. Britton. Trust me, the smell will improve in no time at all.”

“That’s good news, Walt. Any idea what stopped up the line?”

Walt leaned against his mop. “This building is filled with little kids between the ages of five and eleven all day long. Take your pick.”

Stan smiled. “You’ve got a point there, Walt.”

“Busy day?” Walt asked.

“Is there any other kind? I’m just here long enough to grab my laptop. I’ve got a meeting with Dr. Thornton in about 15 minutes.”

Walt plopped his mop back on the floor. “Guess we both have to tend to messes today.”

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Dr. Daniel Thornton leaned across his desk and handed Stan the latest test data. “I want you to tell me what you see, Stan.”

Stan studied the papers carefully. They were the same papers he’d been staring at for days. “Well, our Reading and Math scores are down. Third grade is really low,” he said.

Dr. Thornton leaned back in his chair. “They’re way too low—every one of them,” he said as he tossed his glasses onto his desk. “Look, Stan, you’ve got to get things turned around soon,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’ve got Board members calling me constantly. Two of them have kids on your campus, or have you forgotten that?”

Stan felt his chest tighten. “No, I haven’t forgotten. They remind me every chance they get. And regardless of what they might think, we are trying to get things moving in the right direction.”

“How?” Dr. Thornton asked. “Tell me what you’re doing differently that might help things improve.”

Stan noticed a rise in Dr. Thornton’s voice. “Well, we’re offering tutorials for struggling students. And we’re doing more small group instruction, and—”

“In other words,” Dr. Thornton said cutting him off in midsentence, “it’s just more of the same old thing.” He stood up and walked over to the window. “Stan, we’ve been doing tutorials for years. And small group instruction shouldn’t be something you’re adding, it’s something you should’ve been doing all along.”

“We have been doing it all along, we just need to do it better,” Stan said.

“Insanity,” Dr. Thornton said.

“Excuse me?” Stan asked.

“Insanity. Einstein said it’s doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Dr. Thornton walked over to the corner of his desk and leaned against it. “That’s your plan, Stan? To do the same thing and hope things get better?”

Stan didn’t know what to say. “Dr. Thornton, what do you want me to do? Seriously, just tell me and I’ll do it.”

“If I have to tell you what to do, Stan, then we have a real problem. You’re the principal. You’re going to have to figure it out. If it turns out to be too much for you, just tell me. The last two principals couldn’t get it done either. One left after two years and the other didn’t make it to spring break of his first year. I know they didn’t leave things in great condition, but neither one of us can change that now.”

“I know that,” Stan said.

“If you know it, then do something about it, Stan,” Dr. Thornton said. “The Board isn’t blind—totally. They are aware of the issues we’ve had on this campus.”

“And they expect me to be the miracle worker,” Stan jumped in.

“They expect you,” Dr. Thornton said sharply, “to be the leader.”

Stan thought hard before responding. “I am the leader, Dr. Thornton. I’ll figure it out.”

“I hope so, Stan. I really do.” Dr. Thornton responded. “I’ll be watching the data over the next grading period. We’ll meet again soon.”

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Walt was rinsing his mop heads when Stan pulled into the parking lot. *Doesn’t he ever take a break*? he wondered. He locked his truck and walked over to Walt.

“Is the smell about gone?” he asked.

“Pretty much,” Walt answered. “Still got some cleaning to do, though.”

Stan stared at the yellowed mop heads. “Those things need to be trashed. Don’t you have any newer ones?”

Walt held the mop head up to eye level. “Nothing wrong with these mops, Mr. Britton. The water line that feeds all of the out buildings comes from an old well. There’s a lot of sulfur in the water. The sulfur leaves that yellow look on the mops. But it doesn’t hurt a thing.”

“Oh,” Stan said. “Well, what about that ratty old bucket you’re always dragging around? It’s bent up and rusty. I’m surprised the handle hasn’t broken off. I know there’s money in the budget for some new ones. Why don’t you—”

“Nothing’s wrong with my bucket,” Walt answered. It’s my bucket.”

Stan chuckled. “Well, if it’s the one you want to use, that’s fine.”

“I own my bucket,” Mr. Britton.

“You own your bucket?” Stan said slowly.

Walt picked up the bucket and handed it to Stan Britton. “It’s mine. I own it. It ain’t the prettiest or the lightest. But it’s mine. I have to get my job done with the tools I have. And that’s what I do. I own my bucket.”

“That’s fine, Walt,” he said as he tossed the bucket on the ground. “You and your bucket just keep doing what you do,” Stan said as he turned to walk away.

“You need to own your bucket too, Mr. Britton, if you don’t mind my saying so,” Walt said.

Stan stopped and looked at his head custodian. “I need to do what?”

“Own your bucket the way I own mine,” Walt answered.

“I am the principal of this school, Walt. I use a laptop and pens and paper. Not buckets.”

“You’ve got a bucket, Mr. Britton. Everybody does. Some folks just don’t want to own theirs.”

“Well, why don’t you enlighten me, Walt? I’ve got unruly students, teachers who don’t like each other, parents who are never satisfied, and a superintendent who obviously wishes he had hired somebody else for this job. And now you’re telling me I have a bucket that I didn’t even know I had. I don’t need anything else on my pl—”

“Your bucket is your life, Mr. Britton,” Walt interjected. “It doesn’t look like everybody else’s, but the good Lord never intended for it to be like everybody else’s. Your bucket ain’t the same size as everybody else’s either. Your bucket is big, Mr. Britton. It’s filled with your wife and kids. And this job. And all the skills the good Lord gave you. And your time.” Walt stopped and stared at his boss. “Kids are gonna act crazy from time to time, Mr. Britton. It’s what they do. It’s what they’ve always done. And when me and you are dead and gone, guess what? Kids are still gonna be in school and acting crazy. And some of those crazy kids from years ago are now the parents you’re dealing with. They are who they are. As for Dr. Thornton, he’s not a bad man. He’s under a lot of pressure too. It’s in his best interest for you to succeed. Have you ever thought about that? He hired you so it’s gonna look bad on him if you fail. That’s a lot to carry. Maybe it ain’t a perfect bucket, but it’s yours.”

“What has that got to do with anything?” Stan asked. “The problems around here are a lot bigger than a bucket.”

“You won’t own your bucket, that’s the problem, Mr. Britton.” Walt picked up his rusty mop bucket and handed it back to Stan. “This bucket represents my life. I have a wife, too. And a couple of kids. I have this job, been here over thirty years now. The bucket I was given included a reading disability. I didn’t do too well when I was in school. That made it harder to get a good job. But I own my bucket, Mr. Britton. I could get mad and blame other people for my lot in life but, for what? The bucket I got is the bucket I got. It took me a long time to stop complaining and start living. So, I own my bucket. I still don’t read so good. So, I ask for help when I need it. Sometimes I have to mop up sewage. And some days it seems like all I see is vomit, among other things. It isn’t always clean and pleasant, but I do it with all of the energy I have. It’s part of this job and I’m going to be the very best custodian this school has ever had. That’s my number one goal every single day.”

“You said that I wasn’t owning my bucket,” Stan said. “I don’t know how you could possibly say that. I’m the first one to get here every morning.”

“Second,” Walt corrected.

“Fine. I’m the second person here and probably,” he said, giving Walt a hard look, “the next-to-last person to leave. In between all of that, there’s a never-ending line of gripes and complaints.”

“I’ve got my sewage. You’ve got your complaints. They both stink, but they’ve got to be dealt with,” Walt offered.

“Yeah, well, I’m working myself into the ground trying to make things better around here, and for what? Another lecture from Dr. Thornton? Another phone call from an irate parent? I’m doing the best I can do. I really don’t know what else y’all expect me to do,” Stan complained.

Walt took a deep breath. “You’re a believing man, aren’t you, Mr. Britton?”

“A believing man? You mean like believing in God? Well, yeah. I guess people would call me a believing man.”

“You ever hear of Jethro?”

Stan smiled. “You mean the big dumb kid on the Beverly Hillbillies? I hardly call that a compliment, Walt.”

“Wrong Jethro, Mr. Britton. I’m talking about Moses’s—you have heard of Moses, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” Stan deadpanned.

“Jethro was Moses’s father-in-law.”

“And?” Stan wanted to know.

“And he paid Moses a visit one day. Want to guess what he saw?”

“No,” Stan said. “Besides I have a feeling you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“Jethro saw Moses sitting under a tree all day long. And in front of him was a line of complainers so long that he couldn’t even see the end of it. From sunup to sundown that’s all he did. Listen to complaints and try to give good advice.”

“Sounds like Moses was preparing to be a principal,” Stan mumbled.

“Finally old Jethro sits down with him and tells him what he’s doing is all wrong.”

“Fathers-in-law haven’t changed much, have they, Walt?”

“Let me finish, Mr. Britton. Jethro tells Moses that all he’s doing is wearing himself out doing things that other people could and should be doing. He tells him that he’s got capable people all around him and that he needed to utilize them more efficiently.”

“So, what did Moses decide?” Stan asked.

“He took Jethro’s advice. Not only did he help grow the people around him, but he also freed up valuable time. Time that he needed to focus on prayer and hearing from God. He kind of got his eyes on straight again.”

“So, what do you suggest I do, Walt?”

“Refocus, Mr. Britton. Just like Moses had to do. You ain’t been here all that long and already you’ve changed from the person you were to the person you are now.”

Stan was exasperated. “Refocus? I’m as focused as I’ve ever been.”

“You spend too much time looking back and not enough time pushing forward,” Walt responded. “Mr. Britton, you’ve got to forget about what this school used to be and start planning for what it’s gonna be, what it can be. These teachers have been scrapping with each other for years. And all of these complaining parents ain’t nothing new either. The last principal made it to the spring, but he was done by Thanksgiving. He let a lot of stuff go. Discipline almost disappeared because he didn’t want to deal with the parents anymore. But all that did was make the teachers mad. And then the scores got worse because it was harder to teach when the kids weren’t acting right. It all ties together, Mr. Britton. But now this bucket is yours. You can keep blaming everything on people who used to be here or you can accept the facts and start moving forward.”

“I don’t see where that’s hardly fair, Walt. Why should I have to clean up other people’s messes?”

Walt let out a long laugh. “Cleaning up other people’s messes? I do it every single day with a smile on my face! As for what’s fair, Mr. Britton, you could drive a truck between what we’ve got and what’s fair.”

Stan stared at Walt, unsure of what to say. “So, this bucket thing. How can I own my bucket?”

“Claim it! Be proud of it! Take responsibility for it!” Walt said forcefully. “Nobody else can own your bucket, Mr. Britton, but you.”

1. The First Step Forward

“He told you to do what?” Cindy Britton asked her husband that night.

“Own my bucket. That’s what he said.”

“Own your bucket? What in the world does that have to do with anything?” she wanted to know.

“I think it means I’ve got to stop making excuses for things being the way they are and start leading in a new direction. At least that’s what I took from the conversation.”

“And exactly how do you plan to do that?”

“Well, for starters, I’m going to put a limit on how long I’m staying at work each night. Other than Board meetings, I’m not staying past five o’clock anymore. I’ve missed so much already.”

“I’m liking the bucket rules already,” Cindy said.

“Hon’, you ever hear of Jethro?”

Cindy tried to conceal a smile. “Yeah, he’s the big goofy bumpkin on the Beverly Hillbillies. I think he’s Jed Clampett’s nephew if I’m remembering correctly.”

“Wrong Jethro. I said the same thing,” Stan added. He then proceeded to retell the story from the Bible that Walt had shared with him.

“I’ve been in church a long time and I don’t remember that one,” Cindy responded.

“I didn’t either, but you’ve got to admit it’s pretty powerful when you think about it.”

“Okay, Jethro Junior, what’s next?”

Stan playfully swatted at his wife. “You’re hilarious. I’ve somehow got to get more people on board with what we’re trying to accomplish. And I’ve got to rethink what we’re doing at school. What’s done is done and I can’t change it. I’m tired of recycling the same tired ideas. It’s time to be bold, to try something new. If I’m going to strike out I may as well go down swinging.”

“And a custodian told you all of this—about the bucket, I mean?”

“Yeah, he’s been there a long time. He’s watched all of the other principals fail before me, most of them full of bright ideas when they started. Just like I was. Maybe there’s something to it.”

1. The Restart

“Are you sure you want to do this today?” Gracie Porter asked the next morning. “They’ve had a lot of meetings lately.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Right after school. Just send out the email as soon as possible.

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That afternoon, teachers trickled into the library. Stan watched their faces as they signed in. A lot of whispers and shrugs. They looked tired and confused.

Stan looked at his watch and began. “It’s good to see all of you. I know you’re tired so I won’t keep you long.” He scanned the room, silently checking the roll in his head. “Well, I’ll get right to the point. Our school is in trouble.” He let the words sink in as several teachers shifted in their chairs.

“What did we do now?” Clara Bryant, one of the most senior fourth-grade teachers asked.

“It’s not what you did that’s the problem,” Stan started, “it’s what I didn’t do.” More shrugs and whispers. “I’ve failed you as a leader. And I want to say that I’m sorry for that.” He made eye contact with most of his staff before continuing. “I arrived here with a lot of big plans. I know those of you who’ve been here have seen a lot of us come and go. I guess I don’t want to be one of those who go so soon. So, some things are about to change. I am your principal. You deserve a lot more from me.”

“What kind of changes are you talking about, Mr. Britton, because we’re working as hard as we can,” Clara Bryant said.

“I know you are, Mrs. Bryant. I know all of you are. But I think we need to start working smarter.”

“Meaning what?” asked Wendy Baker, a rookie first-grade teacher.

“Meaning we’ve got to start being blatantly honest with ourselves. Be honest with me, how many of you are satisfied with the scores we have? None of you, right? Or, what about this one: How many of you enjoy the way we’re doing tutorials?” Not one hand went up. “See what I’m saying? We keep doing the same thing and expecting the results to change! We can’t survive if we keep doing things that way.”

“So, what are you proposing?” Wendy Baker asked.

“That we revamp everything we’re doing. That we target the students who need the most help, maybe hire some substitutes to help with coverage so that the small groups will be more successful.” Stan watched as several slumped-over teachers suddenly sat up straight. “We’ve got to turn the tide with discipline. I want all of you to spend as much time as it takes to reestablish the rules in your classroom. And then—here’s the most important part—I expect you to enforce them.”

“And when we do,” Clara Bryant jumped in, “you’ll have a line a mile long at your office.” A few laughs and a lot of head nodding followed.

“I know that. But let me handle the kids and their parents for a while. All I need from you is to take command of your classroom. Be firm. Be fair. But above all, be consistent. Your students have got to know that the classroom is yours.”

“And if they don’t?” Sue Dempsey, a gray-haired second-grade teacher and the longest-tenured teacher on the staff asked.

“If you’ve done everything you can and they still are disrupting class, send them to me. No questions asked.” Stan stared at his staff, looking for a sign. “Any questions?”

Clara Bryant raised her hand halfway. “Mr. Britton, are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into? I mean, this all sounds good and everything, but these parents will eat you alive. They’ll have Dr. Thornton on speed dial and you know how he is. He’ll cave in just to keep them happy. He always does.”

“You let me worry about that. I need all of you to focus on our students and to start doing whatever it takes to improve our scores. Bring your very best to your classroom every day. Tomorrow starts a new chapter for all of us.”

Stan spent the next few minutes briefly outlining a new framework for their tutorial program. With some healthy sparring thrown in, a new plan began to emerge.

1. Launch Day

Stan arrived early the next day. He hadn’t felt so hopeful about things in a long time. Teachers arrived, some of them smiling. That hadn’t happened in quite a while. There was definitely some new energy on campus.

After morning announcements, Stan started walking the halls, being as visible as he could. He peeked into every classroom, making sure the students saw him. So far, so good.

It was almost ten o’clock before the first disciplinary issue arrived at his office. Stan read over the referral, had a brief conversation with the student, and then called the parent.

*“I understand you’re busy right now, Mrs. Robbins. Uh-huh. Yes, I know your cousin is on the Board. Yes, ma’am, I know what time it is. I’m staring at the clock right now. Is that right? I can’t do anything about that, Mrs. Robbins. Your son was given several chances to get his attitude right and he continued to be disrespectful to Mrs. Flores. Yes, ma’am, boys will be boys, but while those boys are students here, they’re going to behave and follow the rules. You need to come and pick him up. Yes, right now. He’s suspended for the rest of today. Yes, he can come back tomorrow. Well, you do whatever you need to do, but if his behavior doesn’t change, you’ll be hearing from me again. I’m sorry you’re so upset. Maybe you should be upset with your—”* Mrs. Robbins hung up.

Gracie Porter tried to hide her smile when Mrs. Robbins finally showed up and walked her son out of the building. “That was awesome, Mr. Britton! That woman has been intimidating people around here for years. All seven of her little darlings have come through here and every single one of ‘em has been perfect. Perfect little spoiled, entitled brats! It’s about time somebody put her in her place.”

Stan folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “I didn’t know you thought so highly of her, Gracie.”

“I don’t!”

“Well, this is about her son, not her. If he straightens up, he’ll be fine. If not, I’ll keep calling.” He turned to walk away, and then added, “Thanks, Gracie.”

“For what?”

“For helping me finally see something that was right in front of me the whole time.”

1. Fill Your Bucket

After a few weeks, things were starting to turn around. Teachers were taken control of their classrooms again and the lines at the office had shortened since the first few days. Stan had answered a lot of phone calls, three of them from Dr. Thornton. Surprisingly, he had been very supportive of Stan’s efforts. *Just keep moving forward*. That’s what he’d said more than once.

Stan’s confidence had returned. He walked the halls with a clear purpose. Even Walt took notice.

“Mr. Britton, things sure look a lot different around here these days.”

“Yeah, they do, Walt. Thanks for sharing the bucket rule—own my bucket. It’s just what I needed to hear.”

“I didn’t do nothing, Mr. Britton, but share some advice that my daddy shared with me a long time ago. But you need to know that this is only the beginning.”

“The beginning? I don’t understand. We’re really rolling right now.”

“And there’s something you have to do if you want to keep rolling,” Walt said.

“What’s that?”

“Fill your bucket,” Walt said.

“I thought you said I had to own my bucket? So, I owned it. Now you’re telling me I have to fill my bucket?”

“Yes, sir, I am,” Walt nodded. “Think about it—what good does it do to walk around with an empty bucket if you don’t intend to fill it?”

“You said the bucket was my life. If that’s true, I don’t see how you can say my bucket is empty.”

“A whole lot of people are living,” Mr. Britton. Just not a whole lot of them got a life.”

Stan scratched his head. “You can’t have one without the other, Walt. It’s not possible.”

“It ain’t?” Walt asked. “Then why is it that you’re as alive as can be and completely empty at the same time?”

“Empty? Me?”

“Yes, sir. You. You have a bucket for sure. We all do. And the good Lord gives us a lifetime to add things to it—to increase our capacity as you school folks like to say.”

“Capacity? Walt, if you took one look at my schedule you’d see my bucket is full.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Walt hummed. “But full of what? Being busy? Chasing paperwork? Stressing yourself out and everybody else around you?”

Stan waved him off. “That’s where you’re wrong, Walt. All of those things go with the job. And I don’t care where you work, that’s just reality.”

“Those things are a part of your job, Mr. Britton, but you’re letting other people fill your bucket for you. And you ain’t ever going to be happy as long as you allow that to happen.”

“That’s called having a boss, Walt. Bucket or no bucket, nobody gets to make all of their own rules.”

“Didn’t say they did. But you have got to fill your own bucket. You’ve got your limits, just like my old bucket. If I fill it half-full, I can still get the job done but it will take twice as long. If I fill it too close to the top I’m probably going to slosh some out. But whether it’s water or sand or paint or whatever—I decide what goes in my bucket, nobody else.”

“Well, my bucket is heavy enough right now. I can’t hold anymore of anything.”

“That’s your choice, Mr. Britton. Sometimes we need to take some stuff out of our bucket, stuff that ain’t doing us a lick of good. Some of it was put in there by others, some of it we put in ourselves. It’s kind of like when you asked me about running the air with the windows open. Remember what I said when you asked me about that?”

Stan thought for a minute. “You said something like out with the bad and in with the good.”

Walt nodded in approval. “Take the bad out and make room for the good.”

“Walt, I’m tired and confused. Own your bucket. Fill your bucket. Put stuff in. Take stuff out. I’m not sure how all of that is going to pull me out of this fire.”

Walt reached into his pocket for a fresh toothpick. “I just know that when I was about thirty or so, I realized my bucket could carry more than I was putting in it. When I first got this job all they let me do was sweep and mop and carry out the trash. That’s all. And for a while, I was happy with that. But it didn’t take long to see that being at the bottom of the ladder also meant being paid at the bottom of the ladder.”

“So, what did you do?” Stan asked.

“Started watching everything my bosses did—everything. I stayed after my shift was over and learned how to strip floors the right way. There are a lot of chemicals involved in that. Before long they let me start helping with floor preparation. Then I started learning how to lay down the coats of wax the right way. Doesn’t sound like much, but if you aren’t careful with the wax you can ruin floors pretty quick. It took some time. And it took some want to. And I wanted to. So those skills got added to my bucket. I intentionally put them there. Nobody else was going to do it. And then later on I learned how to schedule the shifts and fill out the payroll sheets. And today, the man who could barely read is running a good-sized crew and doing pretty well for himself.”

“Yeah, but your bosses allowed you to grow. I bet they even encouraged you some.”

Walt stuck a fresh toothpick in the corner of his mouth. “You don’t think Dr. Thornton wants you to get better?”

“I don’t know. I suppose he does. Sometimes it’s hard to tell for sure.”

“He hired you, Mr. Britton. He not only wants you to succeed, he needs you to succeed. Otherwise, he has to explain to the Board how he somehow chose the wrong person to run this school—again. But he can’t fill your bucket. Only you can do that.

“I wish you would’ve told me about filling the bucket a few weeks ago.”

“Couldn’t do that,” Walt commented.

“And why not?”

“Wasn’t the right time. And there’s a right time for everything, Mr. Britton.”

Stan sighed. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense, Walt. Why wasn’t it the right time?”

“You ever pulled up to a gas station and put gas in somebody else’s car?”

Stan laughed out loud. “Can’t say that I have, Walt. Why would anybody do that?”

“That’s my point, Mr. Britton. You have to own something before you can fill it. Wouldn’t make much sense spending time and money to fill up something that wasn’t yours, now would it?”

Stan smiled. “No, I guess it wouldn’t.” He thought for a minute. “So, how do I fill my bucket?”

“What are you good at? What are your strengths?”

“Strengths?” Stan asked, shrugging. “Depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you, Mr. Britton.”

Stan let a thousand thoughts drift through his mind. “I don’t know, Walt.”  
 “Yes, you do. What are they? Don’t be shy. Ain’t a thing wrong with being good at something and being proud enough to say so.”

Stan thought for a minute. “Umm—setting goals, changing the culture. Or at least I used to be.”

“Keep going.”

“Public speaking. I’m very comfortable in front of an audience.”

“That’s a good start, Mr. Britton. Those things are already in your bucket. Now, what are your weaknesses? Where do you need to get better? And don’t tell me you don’t know because we both know that you do.”

“Weaknesses? The list is long but distinguished. Let’s see, time management. That’s definitely a weakness. Sometimes I’m a people-pleaser more than I should be. And I tend to always do things the same way, you know, never try something brand new.” He paused for a minute.

“Anything else?” Walt asked.

“How long of a list do you want?” Stan asked. “I could go on and on. And if I start drawing a blank, I’ll just call Dr. Thornton or my wife. I’m sure they could tell you a few hundred more.”

“Just work on a few doable things at a time. Nobody can fix everything all at once. Shoot, some things you’re not going to be able to fix at all, no matter how hard you try. But some of those things you mentioned, most of them, I bet, you can get better at. And when you do, you’ll be filling your bucket with skills that will really help you.”

1. Increase Your Capacity

Cindy Britton stared at her husband later that evening. “What are your strengths? Why are you asking me that?”

“Because I value your opinion. I can take it. So, go ahead and tell me.”

“You mean like at work?”

“No, I mean like as your husband. And as a father to our kids. And as the leader of our home—everything that really matters.”

Cindy took a deep breath. “Well, you are so good at still giving us your time,” she paused, and then added, “when you’re home.”

Stan let the words sink in. He knew she was right. He’d been coming home late almost every night. “And that’s a strength?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, we know how tired and stressed you are but you still make time for us. So, yeah, that’s a strength.”

Stan hesitated before asking, “Can you think of anything else?”

Cindy let out a long laugh. “Oh my gosh, yes—lots of things.”

“Like?”

“Like taking care of things around here when they break. And keeping the yard looking great all of the time.” Cindy stared at her husband. He didn’t look convinced. She waived her hands through the air. “You remember, like when that big branch came down after that really bad storm and scraped the side of the house. You were out there the next day bright and early, cutting it up and dragging it to the street. And you replaced the plug on the microwave and you know how much we use that thing. And, and, sometimes you even give up the remote control.”

Stan took a deep breath. “Well, there’s something,” he smiled. “Now, he said as he looked deep into her eyes, “What are my weaknesses? Where do I need to get better?”

“I knew you were going to say that!” Cindy said, her voice rising. “Weaknesses? I don’t know?” she said as she squirmed on the couch.

Stan thought about his conversation with Walt earlier. “Yes, you do. Now, let’s hear it. If nothing else, we’re going to be honest with each other.” He looked at his wife as a few tears trickled down her cheeks. “It’s okay.”

Cindy brushed the side of her face with the back of her hand. “Well, sometimes we—me and the kids—feel like we have to walk on eggshells when you come home. I mean, most days you look mad when you walk in the door. And sometimes the tone in your voice doesn’t make it seem like you’re happy to be home at all.”

Stan took another deep breath. “Keep going.”

“And the kids don’t ask for much, not when you really think about it. But they miss, you, Stan.” She wiped away a few more tears. “They miss seeing their daddy at ball games and recitals and bedtime stories and just sitting around the table for supper.”

Stan’s eyes started to burn with his own tears. “What else?”

“Kaleb is about to turn 12 in a few weeks. Puberty has begun and he’s asking a lot of questions. And some of those questions need to be answered by his dad, not his mom. I’ve never been a twelve-year-old boy trying to navigate puberty, Stan, but you have.” She stared at her husband—hard. “He’s a great kid but he’s feeling so insecure right now. I keep telling him to wait until you get home, that you’re going to make some time for just you and him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Stan asked. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“He’s almost 12, Stan,” Cindy pleaded. “Do you remember how awkward being 12 was? You can’t solve every problem with a text and a few exclamation points.” Hearing her voice rise and crack, Cindy took a deep breath. “Do you really think he’s just gonna waltz right up to you and say, “‘Hey, dad, there’s some really freaky things going on with my body. Why don’t you and me have a talk?’”

Stan felt his chest throb. “I promise I’ll set aside some time for him real soon.”

“You need to, and soon. Because he stopped asking me questions weeks ago.” Cindy reached over and grabbed a tissue from the box on the coffee table. “Abby misses you so much too. She’s been dying to show off her dance recital costumes and new routines for you. Almost every evening she puts on her leotard and slippers and waits. And while she’s waiting she drags the coffee table to the other side of the room so she’ll have a stage to perform on. And she waits some more. And when you don’t show up she drags the table back and runs to her room.”

Stan rubbed his chin, trying not to cry. “Anything else?”

Cindy rubbed her husband’s back. “Do you remember all of those stories you used to make up at bedtime, the ones about a dog named Dog?”

Stan managed a smile. “Yeah, I sure do. I—uh—always included the kids’ names in the stories.”

“Our kids—Kaleb, Abby, and baby Andrea all loved those stories! Kaleb and Abby would make sure their homework was done so they could all pile into our bed for a new story. Even Andrea loved Dog stories. Do you remember how hard she’d belly laugh when Dog would call the dad in the story—Dad? And then Dad would always tell Dog, “Don’t call me Dad!” they said together.

They miss you—not the money or the trips or the toys—but you! They need their daddy to be full-time again!”

Stan grabbed a tissue and dabbed at his eyes. He knew by the look on his wife’s face that she wasn’t finished. “What else?” was all he could manage to say.

Cindy Britton turned and sat cross-legged on the couch. She started and stopped before allowing the words to finally come out. “Stan, I can’t keep doing this—” she paused as she stroked the side of her husband’s face. “Your job gets the very best you have to offer,” she said, her bottom lip quivering, “and we get the leftovers. The kids need you, but I need you, too. I can’t even remember the last time we had some time to ourselves. And I know that your job really stresses you out and zaps all of your energy, but I get stressed out and tired too! But I’m momma. And momma still has to be momma twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I don’t get any downtime, Stan. None! You can come home and kick off your shoes or go take a hot shower if you want to. But we have a very active toddler, which pretty much means I haven’t had a full night’s sleep or been to the bathroom by myself in almost four years. That might not seem like that big of a deal to you, but it is!” She leaned in closer to her husband. “I love being a mom, Stan! I love our kids and everything that goes with being their mom. But I love being your wife too, and everything that used to go with it. But when you come home needing some time to yourself, which happens all of the time, I still have to cook and clean and help with homework, and referee their arguments, and sign their report cards, and go to their activities, and—”

Stan pulled his wife close and kissed the top of her head. “I am so, so sorry.” He softly stroked the back of her head. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately, Cindy. I’ve been miserable at work and then I’m making everyone miserable at home.” He wiped his teary eyes again. “Things are going to change, Cindy. I’m not going to let work destroy our family. And I’m going to be a better husband and dad, I promise I will.”

1. Empty

Stan got up early the next morning, filled his coffee cup, and prepared to read through his morning devotion. *Own your bucket. Fill your bucket.* What good is all of the bucket talk if he lost everything that really mattered to him in the process? He flipped through the pages. His eyes locked on one verse, Matthew 16:6:

*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Stan looked at the pages, quite certain that Cindy had dog-eared them so that he’d see them. But the corners of the pages were pristine. There were no bookmarks either. *It’s just a coincidence*, he told himself. Looking back at the verse, his heart felt empty. He’d been chasing *the whole world* for a long time. More college degrees. A better-paying job. Another move. A promotion. But it was all for them—Cindy, Kaleb, Abby, Andrea. He’d been working himself silly for them. And then it hit him. And it was the truth. He’d been doing a lot of these things for himself. More for himself than for his family. They just provided an easy fallback answer when things got hard. *Why do I keep doing this to myself?* *Why do I keep doing this to my family?*

Stan read the verse again*. Lose my soul?* There weren’t a lot of things he was absolutely sure of, but his relationship to God was one of them. He’d messed up—a lot. He never cheated on his wife or abused his kids, nothing like that. But he’d been incredibly selfish and self-centered. Over time he’d become his own personal messiah—the ultimate life-fixer for all problems and all people, his family included. He’d known the incredible power of forgiveness many, many times. Sometimes from Cindy. Other times from his children. But always from God. And he knew that God had brought Cindy into his life and had blessed them with three beautiful children. *Lose my soul.* They were his soul, his heartbeat. And he was on the verge of losing them. There wasn’t a job or any amount of money that could ever take their place. But he’d been living like that wasn’t the case.

*Fill your bucket.* That’s what Walt had said. And if anyone had a bucket that needed filling, it was Stan Britton. And he finally realized it that morning at his breakfast table.

1. Overflowing

“You look tired this morning, Mr. Britton,” Walt said as he unlocked the building doors.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night,” Stan answered between yawns.

Walt grinned and slapped Stan on the back. “Well, good for you, Mr. Britton!”

Stan forced a smile. “I wish. It wasn’t anything like that. I just had a hard time sleeping. My wife really let me have it last night. And before you say, ‘good for you’ again,” he said raising his hand, “it was a hard conversation.”

“Well, I’ll leave you be so you can get your thoughts together,” Walt said.

“Before you leave, can I ask you something, Walt?”

“Sure, Mr. Britton. Ask me anything you want.”

“I need to fill my bucket like you said. I just—don’t know how.”

Walt placed a fresh toothpick in the corner of his mouth. “Well, your bucket has room for lots of things. But you have to decide what to put in it. And just put good things in. Like your wife and kids. Once you put them in your bucket they become a priority. Start doing things that will benefit them. Tell them you love them. And then show them you love them. You’d be surprised how much love your bucket can hold.”

Stan leaned back in his chair. “I guess I just assumed they were automatically in already. How could I leave them out and not even know it?”

“Maybe you didn’t leave them out. Maybe you just left them at the bottom and kept piling other things on top of them. It’s hard to remember things you can’t see every now and again.”

“Gee, that makes me feel a lot better,” Stan said.

“The main thing is what you start doing today, not what you didn’t do yesterday. You can’t change the past any more than I can.”

“I guess not.”

“Ain’t no guessing to it. And don’t forget about this place. It’s in your bucket too. And it should be. Work at getting a little better every day. Fill your bucket with skills that will help you get better.”

“That might take another bucket in my case,” Stan lamented.

“Your bucket is plenty big enough, Mr. Britton. And don’t be afraid to add some other people to your bucket. You’ve got some talented people on this staff. Allow them to use their gifts. When you do, their successes will become part of your successes.”

“Talented people? Like who? I know what everyone on this staff is certified to do and I’ve got them where they fit.”

Walt leaned against the wall, gnawing on his toothpick the whole time. “So, you think that a piece of paper should define everybody?”

“I didn’t say that, Walt. I’m just saying that we have rules about who teaches what around here. And that piece of paper, as you called it, is pretty much the gold standard when it comes to job placement.”

“Did you know that your new first-grade teacher, Ms. Baker, is a whiz at technology?”

“Yeah, she’s pretty proficient,” Stan responded.

“Proficient?” Walt asked. “She’s doing stuff with her students that nobody else is doing with that projector thing and those little hand-held gadgets they have. And she can fix almost anything. Ask the other teachers who they call when they have a technology problem.”

“So, she’s great with technology, so what? Most of the younger teachers are.”

“But you’re not,” Walt answered. “You said yourself that you’re good at delivering a message to an audience, and you are right. As long as it’s just you and a mic, you’re—what’s the word I’m looking for—proficient! But I’ve heard what the teachers say after sitting through another one of your presentations. *“Mr. Britton is a one-slide wonder,*” he said, imitating a teacher. *“Does he think we can’t read?”* he continued. *“If I have to sit through another meeting and listen to him read straight off of slides—”*

“Okay, okay, I get the point,” Stan interrupted.

“I bet if you were to ask Ms. Baker she could put together a presentation that would have everybody talking for all of the right reasons. Who knows, you might even add to your skill set. And when you do that you are—”

“Filling my bucket,” Stan said finishing the sentence.

“Exactly,” Walt said. “And she’s just one of many on this staff who can help you if you’ll let them.”

“Like who?”

“Like Mrs. Bryant in fourth grade. She knows the pulse of this building better than anybody else. If you want somebody who’ll shoot straight with you, it’s her. She might not always tell you what you want to hear, but she’ll always tell you what you need to hear. And that’s important. And Mrs. Flores in the fifth grade. That lady can play at least four different instruments and—”

“Wait a minute. That’s pretty impressive and everything, but how does that help me?”

“It helps you better understand what motivates your people. She uses music to teach almost everything. I bet you didn’t know that, did you? Let her do a program. Invite the parents. They eat that stuff up! And they haven’t had a real program here in at least three years. I bet even Dr. Thornton would be impressed.”

Stan grabbed his pen and pad and started taking notes. “Well, I’ve got to admit I would have never thought of that one. But I’m willing to try anything.”

“And then there’s Mrs. Dempsey in second grade,” Walt said.

“Dempsey the dinosaur?” Stan asked. “I bet you can’t tell me one way she can help. She pretty much does her own thing. Always has. Even Thornton said to just leave her alone and pray she retires soon.”

“She’s a challenge,” Walt agreed, “but not impossible. She’s cranky and tough but there’s a soft side to her too. I’ve seen it.”

Stan let out a long laugh. “Soft? Mrs. Dempsey? That woman could play linebacker for the Chicago Bears.”

“She lost her son when he was just five,” Walt interjected. “He drowned. She left him just long enough to answer the phone,” he said, his voice trailing off considerably. “She’s blamed herself ever since. Almost tore the soul right out of her. And her oldest daughter died in a car wreck when she was just 16. Drunk driver. And he had connections. No charges were ever filed. And then Mr. Dempsey, being the fine upstanding gentleman that he was, decided he needed a fresh start,” he said, and then added, “with a new wife. A much younger new wife. He left Mrs. Dempsey and their youngest daughter to fend for themselves.”

Stan let the words sink in. “I had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t. I only know because I’ve been here so long. Point is, she’s been hurt a lot in her lifetime but that same woman who’s been through the trials of Job still lets students come to her room extra early for tutoring. And as far as I know, she ain’t getting paid for her time.” He paused long enough to move what was left of his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “I’ve stood outside her door a few times. Not really eavesdropping, just admiring her work. You ought to see her. She’s so patient and loving with those kids. Some tough little rascals too. Now, I don’t have the piece of paper to teach or anything like that, but I’ve got to believe that you could learn something about persevering from a lady like that. Don’t you?”

“Whew,” Stan said. “Just knowing these few things has given me an appreciation for my staff that I’ve never had before. How could I have been so blind?”

“We see what we want to see, Mr. Britton. We all do.”

“Well, I’ll never look at them the same again. I can’t.”

1. The Roll Out

Stan was ready to start filling his bucket. He stuck by his promise to leave work at 5:00 unless he had a meeting. And on those days, he made sure to communicate with Cindy and the kids. No more excuses. Had had another surprise for Cindy.

“You’re taking me where?” she asked.

“Out on a date. Just you and me. I’ve made reservations and everything.”

“And what about the kids? We can’t just go out and leave them here all alone.”

“I’ve got that covered. Your mother will be here in,” Stan said glancing at his watch—“less than half an hour. And grab an overnight bag.”

“An overnight bag? For what?”

“For your clothes, toothbrush—whatever you think you’ll need. We’re going to a hotel afterward.”

“A hotel? Stan, we can’t just up and go to a hotel.”

“Why not? It’s Friday. Your mom already knows and she’ll spoil the kids rotten. C’mon, what do you say? Just me, you, soft music, no phones…”

“Count me in!” Cindy cried. “I’ll be packed in five minutes!”

“That’s great, Cindy,” he yelled as she ran up the stairs. “Cause it would’ve looked kinda strange for me to go all by myself!”

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The following Monday Stan stopped and visited with several of his teachers. He gave each one a task to complete—one that fit their strengths—and asked them to help present at the next staff meeting.

Then he stopped by the cafeteria to talk with Mrs. Fay, the manager.

“Mrs. Fay, I’ve heard you make some of the best homemade cinnamon rolls ever,” he began.

“Ain’t true, Mr. Britton,” she quickly responded.

Stan was unsure of what to say next. “It’s not?”

“Nope. My cinnamon rolls are not among the best, they are the best!” she said proudly. “Ain’t had a request for them in years. Too much butter, too much sugar, it ain’t healthy, blah-blah-blah.”

“I need four dozen for the next staff meeting if you can swing it.”

Mrs. Fay jotted a few notes on her pad. “I’ll have to buy the stuff to make ‘em. Not sure how much that will be. Plus I’ll have to prepare them at home and then bring them up here to bake. All of these new rules, you know.”

“I’ll pay for everything myself, Mrs. Fay. And that includes your time. Just write it all down and I’ll make it worth your while. So, will you do it?” he asked hopefully. “Please?”

Mrs. Fay fiddled with her apron strings. “On two conditions.”

“You name it,” Stan said.

“First, I get to make enough so my ladies and the custodians can have some too. And second, I’ll let you buy the ingredients, but I won’t take a cent for my time. Baking is one of my favorite things to do. It brings me joy. More joy than the money ever would. Besides, money would probably spoil the whole spirit of the thing. You know what I mean, Mr. Britton?”

“I’m learning a little bit every day, Mrs. Fay.”

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Stan paced nervously as the starting time of the staff meeting approached. The aroma of freshly baked cinnamon rolls filled the room, which if all else failed, would be a hit with the staff.

The staff’s mood seemed to change when they entered the library and smelled the cinnamon rolls.

“Help yourselves,” Stan offered. “And there’s fresh coffee and milk if anyone wants it.”

So far so good. Everyone was eating and smiling. Stan looked at the teachers he’d chosen to assist him with the meeting. Mrs. Flores had her ukulele in her lap. Mrs. Baker had a case of hand-held devices and an activity to go with it. And Mrs. Dempsey sat there quietly. And then the meeting began.

“It’s good to see everyone! Are y’all enjoying the cinnamon rolls?” He was met with whistles and applause. “Be sure to thank Mrs. Fay for them. She did an awesome job making them! Okay, so we need to go over some of our data from the last common assessment.” He watched as nearly every smile in the room turned upside down. “But I’m going to let Ms. Baker present it to you.”

Wendy Baker got up, started the projector, and passed out the hand-held devices. “How many of you have used these before?” No hands went up. “Great! Then we’re all going to learn something new. Just push the little green button on the side,” she said holding one up, “and the LED screen will light up.” Stan watched as the teacher’s faces lit up at the same time the devices did. Do any of you recognize the picture on the screen?”

“It looks like the board from Jeopardy,” Clara Bryant offered.

“Correct!” Wendy Baker answered. “But this game of Jeopardy will be how we’ll review our data. If you’ll look at the categories across the top, you’ll see the grade levels and departments. And the questions below are subject areas,” she explained as she pointed to the screen. “So, I’ll draw a name from the hat and that person will get to choose the category and subject. Any questions?”

The mood in the room lightened up as the game began. Teachers were actually hoping their names would get drawn. Stan hadn’t seen that kind of energy in a staff meeting—ever. He kept his eyes on Wendy Baker. She had taken something difficult to get excited about and turned it into a game.

When the last question was asked, it was clear that everyone knew exactly what they were facing with test scores. Clarity had arrived and it showed up without a lecture and columns of data.

“Now, Mrs. Flores is going to talk—or maybe I should say sing—the next topic on our agenda. Mrs. Flores got up, ukulele in hand, and started slowly strumming.

“That game was fun, wasn’t it? And it looks like we’ve got some challenges ahead. But you know what, no matter what the numbers say, we’re better than that.” She smiled and started doing a hula-type dance while she played. “So, here’s a song that says just that—“We’re Better Than That.” She started singing the first verse.

While she sang, Stan noticed that there were smiles and tears everywhere. Mrs. Flores was connecting with the staff on a very deep and emotional level. And then she started repeating the chorus:

*So, when you’re tired and you’ve done your best*

*Your legacy will be more than a test*

*Don’t you ever quit or let your dreams fall flat*

*‘cause believe me, guys,*

*You’re better than that!*

Mrs. Flores received a standing ovation as she strummed her ukulele through the last few chords. Stan shook his head in amazement. He stared at Mrs. Dempsey who had remained very quiet and stoic and wondered if he’d done the right thing in having her close out the program.

“Okay, before we wrap this up, I’ve asked Mrs. Dempsey to talk about our culture and what it means to work here.” He turned and motioned towards Mrs. Dempsey. She stood and walked to the center of the room.

“Hey, everyone,” she said. “I don’t like talking in front of people, but the boss asked me to, so here goes.” She took a deep breath and made eye contact with her coworkers.

“I’ve been here for over thirty years. Some of you weren’t even born when I first walked onto this campus. But I want y’all to know that this is a special place. It’s not just another school. This staff has been like family to me. I wish I could say that all of the days have been fun and exciting, but that wouldn’t be true. And y’all know how I am when it comes to telling it like it is.” A few chuckles came from different corners of the room. “There was a time on this campus where we had something really special. We enjoyed coming to work and being around each other. We helped each other. We cared about each other. And we weren’t always trying to compete with each other. And then, like everything else in life, change showed up at our door. Our student population has changed. Families have changed. Our leadership has changed—a lot. Y’all might not believe this, but I had the same principal for the first 16 years of my time here. And I’ve had six since then. We used to be a school where teachers wanted to be. Now teachers only come here to get experience so they can get out after a year or two and go somewhere better. Well, folks, let me tell you something from the bottom of my crusty old heart—there’s not a school better than this one!” A solid round of applause followed. “So, I want to challenge each of you to buy into what we’ve always been about—helping boys and girls achieve their dreams! Are you with me?” Thunderous applause filled the library. “When times get tough, and they will get tough, dig your heels in and get tougher! No student will ever be forgotten, not anymore! And when those test scores do come in, no one will be celebrating louder than I will!” With that Mrs. Dempsey handed the mic back to Stan and made her way back to her seat.

Stan waited for the applause to subside, but he didn’t rush it. “I want to thank Mrs. Fay for the cinnamon rolls. And our special presenters—Ms. Baker, Mrs. Flores, and Mrs. Dempsey for making this one of the most meaningful staff meetings I’ve ever been a part of.” More applause followed. “I appreciate your patience and your loyalty. Go be better tomorrow than you were today!” As he scanned the audience, he noticed a familiar face pressed against the glass—Walt. He was holding a bucket in his hands. And he was smiling.

1. Traction

The next several weeks brought a glimmer of hope. There was a new kind of energy— a buzz— that had taken root. Things were much better than they’d been before, but they were still far from perfect. A few of the teachers had reverted to their ways, showing up late and ensuring that there would be a steady stream of visitors to the office. But for the most part, improvements could be found everywhere. The results from the six-weeks assessments showed significant growth, especially from the third-graders. Gracie Porter commented daily on the difference in the attitude of the staff. She wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Looks like things are starting to turn in the right direction,” Dr. Thornton commented as he flipped through a summary of their assessment data.

“It’s a start. We’ve still got a long way to go,” Stan said.

“Yeah, but a start is better than not starting at all. Try to keep the momentum. The holidays are just a few weeks away and you know how lax we all get sometimes.”

“I know. We’ve planned several incremental checkpoints to help us stay focused. Our data teams will review the numbers and adjust as needed.”

“Anything else?” Dr. Thornton asked.

“We’ve made sure to plan out the days and limit the number of movies unless they’re clearly tied to the curriculum. And we’re only allowing one party per class at Christmas.”

“Sounds like y’all have thought it through, Stan. Just make sure that you remember that this is still an elementary school. I know the data is important, but we’re still talking about five, six, and seven-year-olds. The oldest ones are what? Ten? Take care of business because that’s what we’re paid to do. But keep in mind that we are all the Thanksgiving and Christmas some of these kids will get. So, have some fun. Help everyone make some memories.”

Stan stared at Dr. Thornton, unsure of what to say. He’d never seen that side of him before. “I will. I’m glad you see how important that is to us.”

Dr. Thornton smiled. “Stan, I’ve been in this game a long, long time. We didn’t have to chase every test score when I started. We taught our hearts out, did the best we could, and still managed to have a lot of fun. I wish things were the way they used to be, but they’re not. We have to play the hand we’re dealt. And we’re both facing a lot of pressure to improve. And, so far, that’s exactly what you’re doing. So, just keep doing what you’re doing.”

1. Carry Your Bucket

“There’s nothing like Christmas parties at an elementary school,” Walt said as he stared at a dumpster full of trash bags.

“I sure am sorry about all of this, Walt.”

“Sorry? About what?” Walt asked. “The mess? It goes with the job. Besides, the kids had a great time. I’ll have this mess all cleaned up before I head home tonight.”

Stan just shrugged and smiled. “You might be the only person I know that could stare down a mess like this and not be mad.”

“It’s all a matter of perspective, Mr. Britton. You see trash and spilled drinks.” Walt grabbed a bag, made sure the top was tied securely, and hurled it into the dumpster. “I see job security. This is what I do. And I try to do my job better than anyone has ever done it.” He wiped his hands on his coveralls. “I carry my bucket.”

Stan wrinkled his brow. “Another bucket rule? I thought I was all out of buckets.”

“You’re never out of buckets, Mr. Britton. Remember, your bucket is your life.”

“I know, I know,” Stan said. “And I have to own it and fill it. And nobody can fill it but me.”

“Yep,” Walt said. “I think you’re catching on pretty good so far.”

“So far?” Stan asked. “I actually got a compliment from Dr. Thornton a few weeks ago. We’re rolling right now.”

Walt sighed. “Yeah, maybe so. But do you want to keep rolling?”

“I think you know the answer to that one, Walt.”

“Then carry your bucket. Owning it is critical. Filling it is important. Filling it with the right stuff is even more important. But that’s just the start.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me,” Stan said.

Walt rubbed his hands and breathed into them to dim the cold. “If you fill your bucket and leave it sitting on the floor, what good is it? It can’t help you or anyone else unless you grab the handle and take it with you. No one can carry your bucket but you. It was made for you. And you have to be careful, really careful.”

“Careful? Why?” Stan wanted to know.

“Because a lot of people think they know your bucket better than you do. Back when I started on this job, I had a supervisor that tried to carry my bucket for me. He kept trying to decide my future. He said that I would be perfect for the lawn crew, you know sitting on a mower and dragging a weed-eater around for eight hours a day. That’s all he figured I could do. I ain’t saying there’s anything wrong with that kind of work because there’s not. It’s hard work, but it’s honest work. But it just wasn’t the right work for me. He wanted me to be satisfied with a job that didn’t require a lot of thinking. But I wasn’t having it.”

“So, what did you do?” Stan asked.

“The only thing I could at the time. I kept my mouth shut and kept working hard. I was determined to show them how good I could be as a custodian. That’s why I started learning how to strip and wax the floors. I wanted to show them that I could do other things besides cutting the grass. After some time passed, my old supervisor retired. The new guy loved the way the floors looked, so he let me stay here. And the rest is history. My work ethic and determination were in my bucket. And I carried it everywhere I went. I made extra sure everyone could see what was in my bucket. If I had gotten scared and gone along with other people’s plans for me, I’d probably be mowing grass to this day. Mr. Britton, the work is yours to do, to finish. If someone else is carrying your bucket, they’re determining the destination, not you. Owning a bucket and filling it won’t mean a thing if it never moves, never takes a step towards being useful. You can only stare at a motionless bucket for so long.”

“Every time I think I’m making progress, you bring me another task. Does it ever end?”

Walt rubbed his hands. “Let’s go to my office. I’ve got a fresh pot of coffee on. And, to answer your question, you don’t want it to end.”

“Why not?” Stan asked as they walked.

“Because the bucket rules are meant to last a lifetime. And you’ve got too much good left to do to be thinking about the end just yet. Your bucket is filling up with some fine things and I know you well enough to know that you aren’t going to be satisfied with the little bit that has happened so far. But if you don’t carry your bucket wherever you go, all of those good things will stay hidden. And if they stay hidden, nobody will benefit from them. Not you, not me, not anybody.”

They reentered the building and stepped into Walt’s office. “So, what do you propose?” Stan asked.

Walt poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Stan. “Carry your bucket,” Walt said. He took a sip of coffee. “Sometimes our buckets get heavy, but they still have to be carried. Too many people put their buckets down when they get heavy. But a heavy bucket is a blessing.”

“How can having a heavy bucket be a blessing? Seems like it would just tire a person out faster.”

“A bucket full of the right things means you’re still learning, still willing to try new things. A whole lot of people go through their entire lives and never fill their buckets even halfway. And that,” Walt said sipping his coffee, “is just a waste of the life the good Lord gave you.”

Walt shrugged. “You still haven’t answered my question? What do I do next?”

“Carry your bucket,” Walt said one more time. “I’ve been watching you carefully, Mr. Britton. You’ve got skills, some better than others like the rest of us. You’ve got to take them with you wherever you go. People need to know—they need to see—what you’re all about. You have to believe and trust the power of what’s in your bucket. Cause if you don’t believe, who will?” Walt took another swallow of coffee and then refilled his cup. “Carry your bucket.”

“I just don’t know, Walt. “

“You’re a man of faith, right?”

Stan shrugged. “Well, yeah. I mean, I try to be. But I haven’t done as well as I’d like lately.”

“So, does your faith only stay in your bucket at home?” Walt probed. “Or do you carry it with you everywhere you go?”

“I try to take it with me,” Stan said. “But like I said, sometimes I just fall on my face.”

“And you’re an honest, hard-working man, right?”

“Well, sure,” Stan answered.

“Are you only honest and hard-working at home?”

“Of course not,” Stan responded.

“Are you only honest and hard-working at work?” Walt asked.

“I already told you.”

Walt smiled. “Then you’ve already been carrying your bucket, Mr. Britton. The key is to keep carrying it when it gets full. Be true to who you are. Always be the man the Lord called you to be.”

1. The Home Stretch

By spring break, the school had been almost completely transformed. Every tested grade level was experiencing double-digit gains on their assessments. Teacher and student attendance had never been higher. Morale was strong. With just a few weeks after the break until state testing, Stan knew that every day counted. They’d come too far and worked too hard to let up now.

Life at home had improved too. Stan kept his promise to leave at 5:00. He and Cindy had reconnected and tried to make up for the lost time. He’d also managed to attend almost every basketball game that Kaleb and Abby played in except for a two-game stretch when he had the flu. He’d even taken baby Andrea on a daddy and daughter date to the restaurant of her choice—McDonald's. And he learned a lot over a quarter-pounder and a Happy Meal that day. Like how Oscar the Grouch was alive and well and still living in his trashcan on Sesame Street. And how Scooby-Doo still wouldn’t go into a haunted mansion, not even for two Scooby Snacks. Or how Mrs. Claus wasn’t fat like Santa was because she was skinny. Everybody knows that. That was the way Andrea had explained it anyway.

Dr. Thornton had recommended Stan for contract renewal at the last board meeting, which was approved by a vote of 5-2. The two dissenting votes, one from Ted Spenser, who said he didn’t want to vote until after the scores came back, and the other from Malcolm Edwards, who hadn’t voted in favor of anyone’s contract renewal—ever—not even Dr. Thornton’s because he thought it was bad business to ever have a unanimous vote if you didn’t have to.

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Some much-needed time off made spring break even more important than usual. Stan took his family on a mini-vacation to the lake. They spent the better part of five days swimming, fishing, and riding around on jet skis. Stan made sure to make some individual time for each of his children. Kaleb loved to fish so they rented a boat and left at daylight one morning, just the two of them. While they fished Stan talked to his son about making good decisions and handling all of the changes he was going through. Though the conversation was awkward at first, they both soon loosened up. Stan was grateful to have this conversation with his son.

Abby didn’t care anything about fishing but they had a rope swing near the house that she loved to play on. Stan spent over an hour pushing her higher and higher. He loved to hear her laugh. After they were done swinging, they took a long walk down the winding roads that intersected throughout the woods. Abby had big dreams. And a boy had asked her to be his girlfriend. That was news to Stan. He started to object because of her age but became more and more convinced it was a first crush thing. Stan realized how quickly his little girl was growing up.

Andrea just wanted to color and watch cartoons. So they did. And after an entire season of Scooby-Doo and coloring five different pictures, he was exhausted. He put Andrea down for her afternoon nap and eased out to the balcony.

Cindy was stretched out on a lounger, her hands clutching a book, her eyes almost closed. Stan took the book from her hands, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead. He stared at his wife and wondered. Where would he be without her? Why had she put up with him for so long? Is there any way he could ever make it up to her? Stan became overwhelmed with gratitude. He thought about how things had been when they first got married. Money was tight, but time for each other was plentiful. They’d made the most of it. They’d dreamed about their future together—a better job, more money, the patter of little feet. Lots of little feet. Back then all of those things seemed so far off. Now they were living in the middle of their dreams with more than twice the money they used to make and three children. And it never seemed to be enough. A great job could be replaced by an even better job. Good money needed to be replaced by great money. A bigger house, newer cars. All of the trappings of success. And they had achieved them all. And it was like they were going backward. At least he was.

Stan knew that he hadn’t been consistently carrying his bucket. He’d filled it with a lot of things, some good, some bad. Over time his bucket had gotten heavier, more difficult to carry. Some days it was just easier to leave it alone and pretend that it didn’t exist. Everyone else did it. Why couldn’t he?

Without realizing it, Stan had become a bucket hoarder. It had become like their garage—filled with a lot of stuff, some valuable, some clutter—nearly all of it hidden. He had forgotten about the things that had helped him be so successful. Finding time for his family. Learning to relax. Unflinching honesty. Strong convictions. Compassion. Prayer. So, he started reprioritizing his life. And that meant that some things were going to have to come out of his bucket. It also meant that he’d have to stop allowing everyone to put more stuff in his bucket, stuff that was important to them but didn’t belong in his bucket at this point in his life.

Later that evening, Walt scribbled a few thoughts in his journal: *I’ve owned my bucket*—finally. *Buckets aren’t filled overnight unless you’re allowing everything to call it home. Filling your bucket with the right things takes effort and want to—do I want to? Every job, every promotion, every life has a shelf life—a beginning and an end. I don’t like to think about that. What I put into my bucket matters. My bucket is heavy, but it is filled with the right things. I can carry it now.*

1. Empty Your Bucket

Stan took another sip from his cup and checked his inbox for the third time. Still nothing. Test scores were due that morning, and everything hinged on the results. All of Stan’s ideas, the changes he’d made, and the rah-rah speeches he’d delivered, would mean almost nothing if the scores didn’t improve. Dr. Thornton had gone out on a limb to recommend his contract renewal and he didn’t want to disappoint him.

“You’re here extra early this morning, Mr. Britton,” Walt said breaking the silence.

Stan jumped. “Just waiting, Walt. Just waiting.”

“Didn’t mean to startle you. Let me guess: test scores?” Walt asked.

“How’d you know?”

“The walls have ears around here, always have.” Walt leaned against the door. “There’s not much that goes on around here that stays a secret for long. I think everybody is a bit on edge waiting on those scores.”

“I know,” Stan said. “Everybody has worked so hard, they’ve bought in,” he said tapping the desk. “All of it will be for nothing if the scores aren’t better. A lot better. I need the staff we have on board to stay. We won’t ever get any traction if the team fractures. And I’ve asked for an assistant principal for next year.”

“An assistant? That’s exactly what we’ve needed around here for a long time,” Walt agreed. “This school has done nothing but grow for the last 10 years. I think that’s why some of the other principals didn’t last too long. It’s too much work for just one man to do and do well.”

“If the scores aren’t better,” Walt said leaning back in his chair, “none of it will matter. The Board will feel a lot better about things and be more likely to release the funds for an assistant if the school is improving.”

Walt scratched his head. “So, what you’re saying is if the scores don’t improve a lot, all of the needs just go away? That doesn’t even make sense. You should get an assistant because you need one, not because of test scores.”

“Agreed,” Stan said. “But everything in this job is political, and I do mean everything.”

“It’s the same on my job. It’s who you know. Always has been, probably always will be.” Walt retrieved a fresh toothpick from his shirt pocket and pursed his lips around it. “But politics or not, we still got a job to do. That’s the main thing.”

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Dr. Thornton tapped on Stan’s office door. “You got a minute?”

Stan looked up and motioned for Dr. Thornton to come in. “Did I forget about a meeting?” he said apologetically.

“No, nothing like that.” Dr. Thornton flipped the locks on his briefcase. “I just thought you might want to see your test scores.”

“You have them? I’ve been checking my inbox all morning. I thought I was supposed to get an email with the scores attached.”

“The scores are reported to the Superintendent first, then we forward them to the campuses. I just got them myself about an hour ago. Here,” he said handing Stan a copy of the scores.

Stan scanned through the papers, looking for overall percentages for each subject and grade level. Third grade, up 14 points in reading, 9 in math. Fourth grade, up 11 points in reading, 12 points in math. Fifth grade, up 8 points in reading, 16 points in math, and 10 points in science. He tried hard to conceal his smile as he made eye contact with his boss. “Well, what do you think?”

Dr. Thornton smiled. “I’m very pleased. The Board is very pleased. And I hope you are too! Stan, you’ve got things going in the right direction. And I’m going to be reminding the Board about the need for an assistant principal next year. We have the money and they’ll go along with it. That should free up more time for you to devote to academics and evaluating the staff.”

“That would be great, Dr. Thornton! I really appreciate it!”

“Don’t thank me, Stan, you’ve earned it.” He locked his briefcase and stared back at Stan. “Have you ever had an assistant before?”

“Never,” Stan answered. “I’ve always had to do pretty much everything by myself.”

Dr. Thornton nodded. “Well, don’t get in too big a hurry to fill the chair. Take your time and choose well. You’ll have to train the new person yourself, kind of become a mentor for a new administrator.”

Stan hadn’t thought about that part of the job. “I will—take my time, I mean. I’ll start working on a list of expectations too.”

“Excellent!” Dr. Thornton responded. “Be sure to share the news with your staff!”

It didn’t take long for the news about the scores to permeate the campus. Everyone was so pleased! Stan gathered the staff after school to congratulate them and celebrate.

“We did it!” he said to a rousing ovation. “All of your hard work, the long hours, the extra tutorials—it paid off! We outscored every campus in the district and our gains are first in our region!”

Mrs. Dempsey made her way to the front and grabbed the mic, startling Stan Britton. “Mr. Britton, it was hard work for all of us, but there’s no way we could’ve made it without your leadership!” Another ovation ensued. “Mr. Britton, I’ve got to be honest with you and everyone else. I wasn’t happy when you first got this job.” The room got very quiet. “I figured you were just another placeholder that probably wouldn’t stay more than a year if that long. And we’ve gotten used to new leaders coming in with their life-changing plans, only to see them flame out by Christmas. So, I was skeptical. But you have shown us what you’re made of. You’ve made me want to stay another year and I can promise you that last October I was one hundred percent sure this was going to be my last year.” She scanned the audience. “Y’all know I’m telling the truth. I probably told every person in here that I was done with this place. For a while, nothing about this school was fun anymore. And school should be fun! Learning should be fun! For the kids, for all of us. But the last several years haven’t been fun at all. And now,” she said as a few tears streamed down her face, “now, it’s fun like it used to be! I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’ve never worked with a principal who was always so encouraging, so full of hope.” She looked out across the room. “How many of you have personally been encouraged by Mr. Britton? C’mon, hands up!” Stan felt chills as nearly every hand in the room went up. “See, that’s what I’m saying. You are a great encourager! Maybe some of the other principals were too, but they never let it show like you have.” She paused before adding, “Y’all, I love the smell of crayons again! And all I can say is thank you!”

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Walt stopped by Stan’s office later that afternoon. “From the cheers that were coming from the library this afternoon, it sounds like everybody was pleased with the scores.”

“Yeah, they were pretty excited. It was an amazing time for all of us. And Mrs. Dempsey really shocked me. And Dr. Thornton told me I was going to get an assistant principal next year.”

“You said Mrs. Dempsey shocked you? How did she do that?”

“She just got up out of nowhere, took the mic from me during the meeting, and started talking about how much of an encourager I’d been to her. Then she asked the other teachers to raise their hands if I’d been an encourager to them. You won’t believe this, Walt, I barely did myself, but nearly every hand in the room went up. I had no idea.”

“Things are looking up,” Walt stated.

“Finally,” Stan said collapsing in his chair. “I am so ready to take a breather, to focus on something else for a little while.”

“Like emptying your bucket?” Walt asked casually.

Stan sat bolt upright in his chair. “You mean I still have to focus on the bucket? The scores are in! We’ve turned the corner! We’ve—more than turned the corner, we’ve knocked it out of the park!”

“Empty your bucket, Mr. Britton,” Walt said.

Stan stared at Walt in disbelief. “Empty it? Are you kidding? It took months of hard work to rearrange it and fill it with the right things. Why in the world would I empty it now?”

“Because other people need what you have, that’s why. Look, you just demonstrated it yourself. Mr. Britton. You are an encourager. It’s one of the things I really admire about you. Some people ain’t got it in them to do that, but you do. You encourage everybody.”

Stan crossed his arms and took a deep breath. “Well, okay, so I’m an encourager. Why can’t they fill their buckets like I filled mine—with lots of grit and hard work?”

“Do you really feel that way?” Walt asked.

“You’re darned right I do, Walt! I have been to more meetings and listened to more complaints than any one man should ever have to endure. This campus was a train wreck when I got here and everybody knows it. And look at it now,” he said as he picked up the folder with the scores. “We’re so much better off now than we were when I first arrived on campus. This place looks like a school again. And I had a lot to do with it if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Mind? Why would I mind? You did have a lot to do with it, Mr. Britton.” Walt took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “But so did everybody else.”

“I know that, Walt. It was a real team effort,” an exasperated Stan Britton said. “But you’ve got to understand, if my plans had failed, I’d probably be out of a job right now. Thornton all but said so. Walt, I’d be polishing my resume and somehow trying to explain to my family that we were going to have to move—again. But these same teachers would still be in the same classrooms next year. They’d all still be employed. You’ve got to admit it, Walt. I had the most to lose.”

“You also had the most to gain,” Walt said.

“You mean like getting another contract?” Stan asked. “Or maybe a big raise? I can promise you that’s not going to happen. Thornton’s so tight that he squeaks when he walks!”

“I mean in reputation and influence. Maybe add in some self-respect.” Walt made eye contact with Stan. “I doubt that the principal’s chair will be your last stop. I bet you’ve got ambitions a little higher than that.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all. But you can’t tell me that turning a campus around and having some great scores won’t make you a much more attractive candidate when a higher position becomes available.”

Stan was unsure of what to say next. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not a bad thing, Mr. Britton. It’s a great thing! But until then you’ve got to remember that what you do or don’t do will leave a lasting imprint on this school. The stakes are higher than you think. That’s why I say you’ve got a lot to gain. And, yeah, there’ve been some really tough days, some I know you wish you could do over again.”

Stan smiled. “You can say that again. It’s been one crazy journey for sure.”

“But what have you learned along the way?” Walt asked.

Stan thought for a minute but said nothing.

“C’mon, Mr. Britton. You’re way too young for your memory to be that bad. I’ve watched you grow.”

“Like how?” Stan asked.

Walt chewed on a fresh toothpick. “Well, when you first got here you were kind of closed off to people like maybe you didn’t trust them.”

“I didn’t know them when I first started,” Stan responded. “It’s hard to trust people you don’t really know.”

“But you learned how to get to know them, didn’t you?”

Stan took another deep breath. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“What made the difference? What took you from point A to point B with this staff? I think one of the guys a few principals back called it the tipping point.”

Stan’s mind raced with several key moments that stood out in his mind. Then a smile appeared.

“I see that smile on your face. So you must know the answer,” Walt said.

“I don’t really have an answer, Walt, at least not the kind you’re expecting.”

“I’m not expecting anything, Mr. Britton. Just be honest with yourself, that’s all.”

Stan Britton leaned back in his chair. “Well, I was remembering that day when Mrs. Fay made those cinnamon rolls for our staff meeting. That was our first real positive meeting.”

“So, she emptied her bucket on you,” Walt said. “See, her bucket is filled with cooking and baking and just caring about folks. She doesn’t have the fancy education you have, but she does have some skills and a great big heart. She shared what she had with someone else.”

“But if she emptied her bucket—”

“The good stuff never runs out, Mr. Britton,” Walt smiled. “Emptying your bucket just means sharing what’s in your bucket. You got a big pat on the back for encouraging people, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you poured something good from your bucket—encouragement—to people who really needed it. You emptied your bucket.”

“But if I empty my bucket—”

“Mr. Britton, will you ever encourage another person, or has your supply run dry?”

“Of course, I’m going to keep encouraging people, Walt. People need it.”

“So your bucket still has some encouragement in it to share?” Walt probed.

“Well, yeah, sure it does, but what has that got to do—”

“Look at it like this. Let’s say that you take your son—what’s his name again?”

“Kaleb.”

“Yeah, Kaleb. Let’s say you take Kaleb fishing. Only he doesn’t know how to fish. But you do. So, since he matters to you, you spend all day teaching him how to fish. You empty that part of your bucket on him.”

“But—”

“Let me finish ‘cause this is important. Now, how do you think you’re going to feel after a long day trying to teach him to fish?”

“How will I feel?” Stan shrugged. “Tired, I guess. Teaching anything takes time and work. And casting an open-faced reel can lead to almost profanity when you’re first learning. Believe me, I know.”

“And what happens to ‘almost profanity’ when you see him have some success at it, like when he makes that first perfect cast? How do you feel then?”

“Proud,” Stan said. “My old man slapped me on the back so hard the first time I made a good cast that I almost fell out of the boat,” he said laughing. “I’d almost forgotten about that day.”

“But after pouring yourself out all day long, did you still know how to fish the next day?”

“Well, of course, I did.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Walt said. “You know what they say, ‘Teach a man to fish—’”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Stan finished the thought, “and he’ll sit in a boat and drink beer all day.”

Walt smiled. “That’s not the ending I was talking about, Mr. Britton. It’s probably true, but it’s not the main point. The main point is this: A man who couldn’t fish now knows how. What he does with his new skill every day after that is up to him.” Walt leaned against the wall. “Maybe it ain’t always going to be fishing, but maybe you could share some of your other skills. You don’t lose them by giving them away, Mr. Britton. You multiply them.”

“Empty my bucket,” Stan said slowly.

“One day, Mr. Britain, and it won’t be too long from now, the time will come when you’ll have to hand this job off to someone else. It might be the new assistant principal you’re going to get next year. Might be somebody else. But if you bypass the handoff and take your bucket and go home, what good is that? Sure, you did all of the work, the learning, the grinding. You paid your dues, hustled, and spent years filling your bucket with the very best of everything. You’ve learned some great lessons along the way. But what will you do with them? Become a bucket hoarder? After all, shouldn’t everyone else have to struggle just like you did? That’s only fair, right?” Walt was gnawing so hard that he had to replace his toothpick.

“So, if you hold onto everything in your bucket, everything you’ve learned will die with you. Is that what you really want?” He stared at Stan—hard. “Well, I’m not doing that, No sir! My goal is to keep filling and emptying my bucket until I’m done. Why? Because what I do matters to me. When I retire I will have spent more than two-thirds of my life doing what I do. I only get one lifetime to live. That’s all any of us gets—one lifetime.” Walt stopped long enough o take a sip from his cup.

“My daddy’s lifetime stopped at 63. That’s not even two handfuls of years away for me at this point. He didn’t get past the third grade in school. His reading was messed up just like mine and he was needed to help work the fields. But I’m gonna tell you something that might shock you, Mr. Britton. My daddy was the smartest man I ever knew! He taught me things I wasn’t going to learn from reading a book. Like how to be an honest man and have a good reputation. And how to give an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay. And my daddy was a helper. Many's the time I saw him stop doing his own work just to go and help somebody who needed helping. Daddy was sure big on doing what the Good Book says, especially the part about doing unto others. Must’ve heard him say it more than a hundred times.” Walt took another sip from his cup. “And he was right, Mr. Britton. I’m an old man, but I still try every day to be just like him.”

Stan smiled at his head custodian and marveled at the wisdom that he’d stored up over the years. “You’re a fine man, Walt. I bet your dad would be very proud of you.”

“I appreciate the kind words, Mr. Britton. But I’ve made a lot of mistakes, enough for two lifetimes, maybe more. But I’ve also learned a lot along the way. I want to pass along everything I’ve learned to whoever needs to hear it. I’ve got two young guys on my crew right now who are just getting started, neither one of them much past twenty-five years old yet. One of ‘em ain’t got enough sense to come in out of the rain, but he tries hard. And the other one thinks he already knows more than me,” Walt said laughing. “But I remember what it feels like to be the new guy, Mr. Britton—the one who doesn’t know anything—the one who’s so afraid he’s gonna mess up that he never pushes himself at all. So, I try to spend some extra time showing them the things they need to know. Some days I stay past my shift just so I can teach them something new. Shoot, I don’t know if they’ll stay in this job for very long, but I’m going to help them as much as I can. The way I got it figured, if anything I’ve said or done helps just one of them become a better worker, I will consider myself successful.” Walt stopped to wipe what was left of his shredded toothpick from his lips. “I’ve heard all of the compliments for years. *‘Mr. Walt, your floors are the shiniest in the district. Mr. Walt, your building always looks brand new! Mr. Walt, I wish my school looked like yours.’* It’s good to hear those kinds of things every now and again. But what I want now is significance. I’m at a place where I want to invest in something that I know will outlive me. And whether I make it to 63 or 103, or maybe not even long enough to wake up in the morning, I refuse to allow thirty-plus years of my life to die because I didn’t want to share it!”

1. Get Everyone Wet!

Stan stopped by the store on his way home. A collection of Woody Woodpecker cartoons. Two extra-long jump ropes. A catcher’s mitt that would fit him. And a bunch of fresh flowers—yellow tulips.

“How was your day?” Cindy asked as he entered their house. “More groceries?” she asked, staring at the bags. “Are you cooking tonight?”

Stan unloaded his bags on the bar. “It was great,” he said kissing his wife. “And these aren’t groceries, they’re gifts.” Stan peered into the living room. “Where are the kids?”

“Kaleb is finishing his homework. Abby is getting ready for her dance class, I hope. And Andrea is—most likely watching cartoons upstairs. Or maybe playing hide and seek with her dolls.”

Stan walked over to the stairs. “Hey, kids, I’m home! Y’all come down here for a minute.”

Cindy tried to peek into the bags. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s a surprise. Just be patient.” He stepped over to the stairs again. “Hey, kids!” He barely got the words out before Andrea jumped from the second step into his arms.

“Hey, mister!” she said giggling.

“Hey, you! Were you a good girl today?”

Andrea looked over her daddy’s shoulder at her mom. “Was I, Momma?”

“Pretty good,” Cindy said. “Where’s your brother and sister?”

“They’re coming, Momma.”

Andrea was right. Kaleb and Abby bounded down the stairs, reaching the kitchen at about the same time.

“Hey, Dad,” Kaleb said.

“Hey, Dad,” Abby added. “What’s up?”

Stan stared at his family. “Oh, nothing. I just wanted to see how fast y’all could make it down the stairs, that’s all.”

Kaleb leaned against the wall and folded his arms. “You called us down here to race?”

“Dad, that’s even too weird for you,” Abby said. “And that’s saying something.”

Cindy gave Stan a playful shove. “You better speak up or you’re going to have a mutiny on your hands.”

Stan nodded. “Well, yeah. So, I kind of stopped by the store today, and, let’s see what I have in here.” Stan almost had his entire head in the bag. He pulled it down to where his eyes were visible. “I think there’s something in here for you,” he said to Andrea, “and you and you,” he said nodding towards Kaleb and Abby.

“What?” they all asked together as they inched closer to the table.

“These,” he said as he pulled out the jump ropes, “are for you.” Abby clutched them in her hands. “Thanks, dad! And these are the good ones that don’t twist up and get tangled. And they’re long enough to double-dutch!” She leaned in and gave her dad a hug.

“You are so welcome, sweetheart!”

Stan looked at his son. “Let’s see, Kaleb. Seems like I had something in here for you. Hmmm, where could it be? Here it is,” he said as he pulled the catcher’s mitt out of the bag.

Kaleb’s eyes lit up. “Is that for me?”

“Well, I actually got it for your mother, but she isn’t able to bend like she used to. So, yeah, it’s for you, Son.”

Kaleb put his hand in the mitt and popped it with his fist. “Gonna take a while to break it in,” he said.

“Yeah, I figure me and you could get started on that this weekend. That is if you don’t mind tossing a few with your old man.”

“Just you and me?” Kaleb asked hopefully.

“Just you and me.”

“That’d be great, Dad!”

“So,” Stan said clearing his throat, “let’s see what else we have in here. “Well, what do you know?” He slowly pulled the DVD of cartoons out of the bag and handed it to Andrea.

“Woody!” she squealed. “Is this whole great big thing for me, Daddy?”

“The whole great big thing,” he said. “And I bet me and you could watch a few of them before you go to bed tonight if you want to.”

“I want to! I want to!” Andrea said as she danced around the kitchen with her new DVD.

“Hey, what about Mom?” Abby asked.

“What about her?” Stan asked.

“Well, you got the rest of us something. What did you get for her?”

“Aw, kids, this is about y’all, not me,” Cindy blushed.

Stan reached back into the bag. “Not quite,” he said as he pulled the tulips out and handed them to Cindy. “These are for you.”

“Yellow tulips,” Cindy said. “You remembered.”

“For once,” Stan said. He took a step closer to his wife and gave her a hug and a kiss. “I couldn’t forget my best girl. And since I’m going to be spending some one-on-one time with everybody else, I figured maybe we could make some time for us too.”

1. Breathe

“You’re moving like an old man this morning, Mr. Britton,” Walt said Monday morning. “You alright?”

Stan leaned back in his chair and moaned. “I’m fine, Walt. I just spent the weekend jumping rope, playing catcher for a twelve-year-old with a wicked curve ball, and watching over three hours of Woody Woodpecker cartoons with a four-year-old while curled up on the most uncomfortable beanbag chair you’ve ever seen.” He took a sip from his coffee cup. “Other than that, I’m fine.”

Walt let out a long laugh. “You ain’t as young as you used to be, huh. None of us are, not even me. Well, don’t fret too much. You’ll be alright. Besides, it sounds like you made some good memories, huh?”

“Better than good, Walt. We made some great memories. I can’t remember when I’ve ever had a better weekend. You know, Walt, I’d almost forgotten how my youngest daughter, Andrea, laughs with her whole body. I mean, that girl laughs all the way down to her bones! And when she starts laughing, it’s like totally contagious! I laughed until my sides hurt and I don’t even like Woody Woodpecker. I’m more of a Charlie Brown kind of guy.”

“Sounds like you and Andrea and Woody had a great time.”

“It was amazing. And, my Abby. Have you ever double-dutch jump roped before?”

Walt’s eyebrows shot straight up. “Double-dutch? Not since I was a kid. Do kids still do that?”

“Mine does,” Stan said. “And she’s good too. Her coordination and skill. I mean, I never knew she was that athletic. And you know me—”

“Don’t tell me that you tried—”

Stan nodded. “Yeah, I tried,” he said while rubbing his back. “Cindy and Kaleb were more than happy to help with the ropes. And Andrea grabbed her pom-poms and cheered me on.”

Walt laughed out loud. “How’d it go?”

“Well, me and my two-inch vertical leap gave it all we had,” Stan said laughing. “I’ve never been so sore in my life!”

“That’s great, Mr. Britton,” Walt said. “I’m guessing you made a special memory with your son, too?”

Stan held his hand out, his palm toward Walt. “You see that? That hand is extremely tender from playing catcher for Kaleb. Chasing his curveball was rough enough. But he’s got a fastball that nearly knocked me over.”

“Family memories are the best kind, Mr. Britton,” Walt said. “Always have been. Always will be.” He inserted a fresh toothpick. “You emptied your bucket this weekend. You gave your children the gift of your time. How does it feel?”

“Well, I sure don’t feel empty. If anything I feel more content than I did when I left here on Friday. I know it might sound wishy-washy, but the videos and the jump ropes and playing catch, all that stuff was fun. But do you want to know what the best part was?” Walt just smiled. “It was just being with them, Walt. Listening to them laugh. Them telling me about their lives. Reconnecting with them. That was special.”

“And your wife?” Walt asked.

“We carved out some time for us too.”

“Did you let her pitch or catch?” Walt asked with a grin.

“We made some special memories of our own, Walt.” Stan leaned forward in his chair and smiled. “Well, aren’t you going to say it?”

Walt stopped chewing his toothpick. “Say what?”

“Good for you, Mr. Britton!” Stan said enthusiastically.

“Well, let me be the first to say it then,” Walt said as he cleared his throat. “Good for you, Mr. Britton!”

1. Finishing Strong

“Gracie, have all of the teachers turned in their end-of-year checklists?” Stan asked his secretary on the last day of school.

Gracie Porter thumbed through the stack. “Pretty much. I’m still waiting on Mrs. Dempsey. She said she’d have it done before she leaves this afternoon.”

“Mrs. Dempsey,” Stan Britton sighed. “I’m not surprised.”

“She’s always been challenged when it comes to being on time, but she was all smiles when she walked out of here earlier. And that hasn’t happened in years,” Gracie said.

Stan nodded. “As long as she gets it done today. What about you, Gracie? Are you almost done with your reports?”

Gracie Porter sighed. “Almost. One of the files is taking a long time to upload. Other than that, everything will be done. I’m just relieved that we’re not having summer school on our campus this year.”

“Me too, Gracie. We have a lot to do to get ready for next year as it is.”

Stan walked the halls and inspected classrooms. “Have a great summer!” became a common refrain as he saw his teachers finishing up the work in their rooms. When he reached the first-grade hall he saw Walt scrubbing the walls. “Hey, take a break, Walt. You’ve got all summer to do that.”

Walt looked up momentarily but continued scrubbing. “Gotta finish strong, Mr. Britton. Gotta finish strong!”

Stan shook his head. “Look around, Walt. The kids are gone. We are finished!”

Walt wiped the sweat from his brow. “Pencil marks don’t magically disappear off the walls. And the wax from the crayons is hard to remove from the grout,” he said pointing to the wall. “My walls have got to be right before I’m finished.” He scratched at the grout and withdrew a few flecks of green crayon. “Seems like there’s always one more thing to do.”

Stan threw up his hands. “Please don’t tell me there’s another bucker rule!”

Walt laughed. “Naw, nothing like that. But these marks are this year’s mess. And I don’t leave this year’s mess for next year’s students. I clean up this year’s mess this year. I finish strong.”

“But there’s time—” Stan started to say.

“And none of it’s guaranteed, Mr. Britton,” Walt said. “My daddy used to say that the only way to get ahead was to keep working while everybody else was resting. So, that’s what I do. And there’s a lot to do to get the building ready for the big stuff like stripping and waxing the floors. But that’s next year’s work and I can’t start next year’s work until I’m through with this year’s work. Make sense?” Walt asked.

“Finish strong?” Stan asked.

“Finish strong,” Walt nodded. “I’ve got work that could be put off until later, but I’ve also got a lot of work headed my way like a freight train. If I wait too long the piles will eventually meet. Believe me, I know from firsthand experience. And when the old work and the new work collide, and they will collide, the mess just gets bigger. It’s the same for you and the teachers. And for Dr. Thornton. And your wife. And for every other breathing soul in the world. Putting stuff off doesn’t make it disappear. Besides, if something happened to me and they replaced me tomorrow, I’d want my replacement to start off with the cleanest campus he’s ever seen. And that is up to me. It’s my job.”

“It’s in your bucket, right?” Stan asked.

Walt smiled. “Yep. And as long as it is I’m going to give it my very best every single day.”

“I’m not surprised, Walt,” Stan said.

Later that afternoon, Stan stared at the piles on his desk. He had reports to sign, work orders to complete, evaluations to submit, and a handful of unanswered emails to respond to. None of these tasks were urgent. He thought about leaving early and surprising his family. Then he glanced out his office window and saw Walt heading to his storage building. “Finish strong” he mumbled. He picked up the phone and called his wife.

“Hey, are you almost done?” Cindy Britton asked.

“Not quite, hon’.” He stared at the piles on his desk. *Finish strong*. “It looks like I might be a little late. I really need to get all of this paperwork finished before I call it a day.”

“Okay, so what about dinner?”

“Ummm, tell you what. I’ll pick up some pizza on the way home. That way you won’t have to cook and maybe we can all watch a movie or something. How does that sound?”

“That sounds great! Do whatever you need to do. We’ll be waiting!”

“Okay then, Text me the kind of pizza y’all want. I’ll see you in a bit.” Stan hung up the phone and stared back at his desk. The piles were still there. “Well, I guess I better get busy,” he said out loud.

1. Rinse and Repeat

“It’s a challenging job, but it can be very satisfying. So, do you have any questions for me?” Stan looked at his newly hired assistant principal, Dr. Leonard Milton, and waited for a response.

Leonard Milton thought for a moment. “None that I can think of. I’m just grateful for the opportunity, Mr. Britton.”

“Well, you really impressed the interview committee and they’re a tough group to impress.”

“I think my doctorate with a perfect 4.0 GPA probably helped, don’t you think?”

Stan rubbed his chin. “Maybe. But for now, that doctorate is just a few extra letters added to your name. The committee was impressed by your answers to real-life scenarios, not your GPA.” Stan noticed the puzzled look on the face of his young protégé. “Don’t get me wrong, earning a doctorate is pretty darned impressive. I was almost finished with mine when my youngest daughter was born. Things were pretty tight financially, so I had to step away for a bit. But I’m probably going to jump back into my program in the fall. All I’ve got left is to finish my dissertation. And then I’ll have another framed certificate to put on my wall.” Stan took a sip from his cup. “Just don’t forget that these teachers didn’t recommend you just because you had a doctorate.”

“What are you writing your dissertation on?” Leonard Milton asked.

“Transformational leadership, its effects, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds interesting. Are you going to run a survey and then perform statistical analysis on the data?”

Stan smiled. “Let’s just say I bring my research to work with me every single day. And then I take it home.”

“Every single day?” a puzzled Leonard Milton asked.

“Every single day,” Stan answered. “A lot of the data is already in. The rest will come in time.”

“Oh. So, what do I need to do first?” Leonard Milton asked. “Textbooks or schedules or—”

“First,” Stan cut in, “own your bucket.”

Dr. Leonard Milton’s eyebrows shot straight up. “Own my what?”

“Your bucket. I’ve got a bucket. You’ve got a bucket. We’ve all got a bucket. You just need to own yours.”

“Mr. Britton, you just lost me. Owning a bucket? What does that have to do with anything?”

“More than you know,” Stand answered. “Way more than you know.”

**The Bucket Rules**

**A Quick Review and a Challenge or Two**

**Bucket Rule # 1: Own Your Bucket**

What’s in your bucket? Who is in your bucket? Do you know? Before you get too deep in thought, I want to make one thing absolutely clear: A Bucket Rule has nothing to do with a bucket list. Bucket lists are filled with things we want to do, places we want to go, or goals we hope to accomplish in our lifetime. I’m a goal-setter so making a bucket list isn’t that far-fetched of an idea for me. Have I made a bucket list? Nope! Do I plan to? Nope! However, a bucket rule is different. A bucket rule is a very simple principle that, if implemented, can profoundly impact your life. Have you owned your bucket? Do you claim it as your own?

I do not like to travel. I want my feet to stay on familiar ground as much as possible. I do recall an instance when I had to travel by plane. I found absolutely nothing friendly about flying the friendly skies! For me, other than landing the best part of the trip was finally locating the right luggage conveyor. There’s no place like home, right? At our mega-sized airport in Jefferson County, there are only two luggage conveyors so I had at least a 50/50 chance of choosing the right one! Victory was close! I watched and waited for my luggage. It wouldn’t be hard to spot. It looked brand new because it had rarely been used. And then it happened. The conveyor started conveying and it became clear that several other travelers didn’t have the common decency to purchase luggage that didn’t look like mine! Around and around they went. I almost grabbed an imposter bag by mistake! That would have led to pure chaos! When I was absolutely sure that I had the right bags, my heart was filled with sheer rapture! Why? Because those bags were mine. I had invested in them. They were filled with my things. Things that I packed myself. They had value to me. To any other traveler, the contents of my bags were probably useless. And I was fine with that. I owned my bags. I put my name on them. I recognized them. No one else would be leaving the airport with my bags.

Why is any of that important? Because it illustrates the first bucket rule—own your bucket. You are the recipient of an incredible gift—your life! And you only get one. You can’t trade it for somebody else’s. So, what do you do? You own it! It is yours! And it is unique to you! As was the case with my gently-used luggage, you choose what goes in your bucket and what stays out. That is an awesome privilege! And an incredible responsibility! Because I am a firm believer in God, my views are bound by a common thread of faith. That thread weaves in and out of every part of my life; it touches everything. If you are a person of similar beliefs you’ll understand what I’m talking about. But even if you are not, the principle still applies—own your bucket. Don’t waste the life God gave you wishing you had somebody else’s!

We don’t get to choose when our lives begin or end, but we do get to choose a lot of what happens in the middle. I’ve heard it said that your life is what you make it. I believe that is partly true. It is built on the choices you make. And the ones you don’t make. The lives you touch. And the ones you don’t. The chances you take. And the ones you don’t. One bucket. One lifetime. Hundreds of choices. Have you taken ownership of your bucket? Do you want to?

**Bucket Rule #1 Challenge:**

1. Take ownership of your bucket.
2. Evaluate your bucket.

**Bucket Rule #2: Fill Your Bucket**

As I write these words gasoline is inching closer to $5 per gallon. For some parts of the country that would be considered welcomed relief. In SE Texas it’s considered highway robbery! Regardless of the cost, and depending on how far you commute each day, sooner or later you’re going to have to find a gas station and fill up! Why? Because no matter how new and expensive your mode of transportation may be, an empty tank means you’re going nowhere. Even the rechargeable cars that exist now still have to stop at charging stations. Whether you’re filling up on electricity or gasoline is immaterial. Empty is empty!

Once you’ve owned your bucket you’ve got to fill it! Empty buckets. How many people buy buckets just so they can look at them? In the same way, God didn’t give you a life so you could park it on the sidelines and watch. Fill your bucket! Here’s the good news: You get to choose what goes in or stays out of your bucket. So, what’s in your bucket these days? Your spouse? Your faith? Your children? Grandchildren? Job? All of these are awesome things to have in your bucket! Just don’t forget that they are in there! It’s so easy to cover them up with other things, and for most of us, we forget about the things we can’t see.

What skills do you possess? Don’t be shy! What are your strengths? Brag on yourself a little bit! Are they in your bucket? They should be! But just because they should be doesn’t mean that they are. Everything you place in your bucket is there because of an intentional act. The same is true of the things you leave out. I do not include my weaknesses in my bucket. Why not? Because I am old enough to know the areas where I can get substantially better and the areas where I am wasting my time trying to get better. Time is too precious a commodity to waste on things that are out of your strength zone.

I know you know the answer, but I am going to ask you anyway: Who have you given access to place things in your bucket? I find it odd that we’d never give someone access to our email accounts but we’ll give them access to our buckets all day long. Be careful! Some well-intentioned people (and some not-so-well-intentioned ones) will try to place things in your bucket for you. Some will be great things to add. Others will be destructive. **You’ve got to know when to say NO!** Just remember the golden rule of bucket-keeping: There is only one gatekeeper for your bucket. And that gatekeeper looks an awful lot like you!

**Bucket Rule # 2 Challenge:**

1. Take inventory of your bucket.
2. What is in there?
3. Who is in there?
4. What/who do you need to add?
5. What/who do you need to subtract?
6. Identify people who have skills that you lack. Go learn from them.

**Bucket Rule # 3: Carry Your Bucket**

I don’t know anyone who would buy a new car and then park it in their driveway and walk to work. Yet so many people will fill their buckets and then ignore them. It happens all of the time. And I think I know why. Buckets can get heavy. Sometimes the thought of carrying one more thing on top of everything else you’re trying to juggle is just too much. So, rather than grabbing that handle and facing the new day, we take the easy way out and leave our buckets behind.

We love the idea of owning our bucket! Ownership can be empowering in a lot of ways. We go all-in on the idea of controlling what goes in and stays out of our bucket. Nobody else should ever fill your bucket without your consent. At the same time, nobody else can carry your bucket. It’s yours! It was made just for you! But a bucket that never moves never helps. And you are the only one who can move it! Picture it this way: You are watching the marathon of life. It’s hot! Several runners are starting to fade. They really need what’s in your bucket. It’s filled with the coldest, most refreshing water that ever bubbled out of a spring, but no one will ever know it. Why not? Because you left your bucket at home.

You have a skill-set. You have been equipped with a lot of abilities that can help transform organizations and impact the lives of others. Some of those abilities are just things that drive and motivate you—they are your passion in life! Some of the others are things you’ve had to scratch and claw and fight to learn. Either way, someone out there needs what you have. Most of them are not going to go on a bucket search for your bucket. Most of them are not aware that you even have a bucket. They don’t even realize that they have one either! So, you can play hide-and-seek with your bucket or you can pick it up and carry it with you. One truth I learned at Grandma’s house was this: Buckets that never move usually end up being used for target practice.

**Bucket Rule #3 Challenge:**

1. Locate your “handle” and use it often.
2. Identify your strengths.
3. Identify people/places that could benefit from your strengths.

**Bucket Rule # 4: Empty Your Bucket**

I mentioned the importance of carrying your bucket in the illustration about the runners. Imagine if you had your bucket full of cold refreshing water with you but you refused to let anyone have a sip. I know what you’re probably thinking: “No one would ever really do that. That would be mean!” Well, my friends, it happens every day in the workplace!

We are surrounded by people whose buckets are so full they are about to slosh over the side. And they refuse to share one drop. Some of them won’t even acknowledge the contents of their buckets. For whatever reason, some people do not play nice with others. They expect every person to grind and sweat and bleed their way to the top the same way they did. So, let’s just call it what it is—old-school thinking. Old-school thinking does have its merits though. Being on time for work is considered old-school thinking. So is dressing professionally. And working a full eight hours for eight hours of pay. Other parts of old-school thinking are just—old! Technology has completely changed the way the modern workplace operates.

If they were to make a movie about my brain they’d probably call it, *Triassic Park* (way before Jurassic). I am a bit of a dinosaur. My younger colleagues (and almost every single one of them is younger than I am) will attest to that. Before I become completely extinct, however, I intend on freely sharing what 30+ years of experience have taught me. Why wouldn’t I? I remember the struggles of trying to learn and adjust in this business when the veterans either couldn’t or wouldn’t share anything. Way back in the late 1980s when I started, merit pay was all the rage in Texas. They called it the *Career Ladder*. And it nearly killed collegiality in education. The premise was that paying teachers for their performance on the teacher evaluation instrument would somehow lead to an increase in student learning. What it led to was a drastic decrease of veteran teachers sharing their expertise with newer colleagues. If you helped someone they might end up with a higher score than you and, since the money was capped, it happened over and over again. So, the end result was that nobody’s bucket was ever emptied. We had a district full of bucket hoarders!

Today's professionals are facing challenges I never had to face, at least not to the extremes that we’re seeing now. The teacher shortage that we’ve been reading about for years has finally shown up with a vengeance. High-stakes testing has pushed many of our best and brightest teachers to seek employment outside of education. Politics has always been embedded into school life, but not like it is now. The *Who* we’re teaching, *What* we’re teaching, *Why* we’re teaching it, and *How* we’re teaching it has never been under more scrutiny.

Education used to be a lifelong career choice. You went to college, completed your student teaching assignment, got your first teaching job, and either moved up to school administration or retired from the classroom about 30 years later. My, how things have changed! Today’s teachers and leaders need help! And those of us who’ve been around a while have what they need. The real question is whether we’re willing to share it.

Every career has a shelf-life. Mine does. Yours does. Every person who came before us discovered it and everyone who comes after us will discover that it’s true for them too. During my career, I have experienced some incredible victories. And some mind-numbing defeats. I have made some brilliant decisions. And some really dumb ones too. On some level, I think we all have. I’ve won several awards, some as a teacher, and some as an administrator. To be completely honest, I only know where one of them is today. While I am so appreciative of those who saw something award-worthy in my performance, those things no longer move me. Now I seek significance. I want to invest in the next generation of leaders and the best way I can do that is to empty my bucket! It is my intention to leave this profession with an empty bucket—I’m going to get everyone around me wet! Remember, you don’t lose it when you share it! Sharing doesn’t subtract, it multiplies! What they decide to do or not to do with what I give them is up to them. Here’s what I don’t want my epitaph to read:

Here lies old Larry

An educator by trade

He had many gifts,

that guy had it made!

But he kept to himself

and shared nary a one

Of the life lessons learned

before his time here was done.

Who benefits now

that his life has now ended?

The ideas are outdated.

The advice not so splendid.

For old Larry’s bucket

with its handle so bent

Never ventured into

all the places he went.

The poor fool’s old bucket

still sits in his closet

Where none can withdraw

and none can deposit!

So let this lesson

be a warning to all!

Empty your buckets

in the spring, in the fall!

What happens next

will be anyone’s bet

But at least at the end

You’ll know you got them all wet!

Okay, so it’s hardly a Shakespearean sonnet. But I hope that you can harvest at least a kernel of truth from these lines. Or perhaps on a larger scale, maybe something from this little book resonated with you on some level. Maybe I emptied my bucket a little bit! I sure hope so! If our paths ever cross, let me know your thoughts on the book. If not, keep owning it, filling it, carrying it, and emptying it! Spread the message about The Bucket Rules!

**Bucket Rule #4 Challenge:**

1. Identify people you can mentor.
2. Share at least three of your gifts in the next year.