



New role, new conversations

A school leader's guide



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This guide for school leaders has been produced in collaboration with Bruce Wilson of the Education Business and Nous Group, an Australian management consulting firm that works with public, private and not for profit education agencies and institutions to improve educational outcomes. It includes a framework for interpersonal behaviours related to leadership, as well as supporting research, tools and references.

This icon indicates a link to a resource.



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Introduction

The Leadership Scenarios

Principals have a key role to play in making a difference to the lives of young people and to society. However, they work in a challenging and changing environment; they are unlikely to succeed unless they are well prepared and understand their role.

The Leadership Scenarios are a series of videos, each with a framework, guide and list of resources for developing practice. They have been designed to assist new principals to understand and deal with the challenges they may face in their new role and appreciate how their work relates to the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (the Standard) and the *Leadership Profiles*.

The Standard is a public statement that sets out what principals are expected to know, understand and do to succeed in their work. It is represented as an interdependent and integrated model that recognises three leadership requirements that a principal draws upon within five areas of professional practice.



Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Source: *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*, AITSL (2014)



New role, new conversations

New role, new conversations, one video in the series, focuses on the Professional Practice of Developing self and others, in particular:

- supporting all staff to achieve high standards by managing performance and through effective continuing professional learning and feedback
- supporting others to build capacity
- treating people fairly and with respect.

Conducting difficult conversations

A key focus of the school leader's role is to deliver an excellent learning experience and outstanding learning outcomes for students. This demands a focus on continuously improving the capability of teachers and support staff. To this end, leaders conduct development conversations to develop professional capacity and a sustainable approach to school improvement. However, at times, providing constructive feedback can be difficult and uncomfortable.

This guide summarises a range of best practice techniques, methods and tools to use when planning and engaging in difficult conversations. Carrying out such conversations in a careful, considered and effective manner leads to better outcomes for students, stronger interpersonal relationships and the school leader's professional growth. The more it occurs, the easier it becomes. It also contributes to a culture of high expectations across the staff.

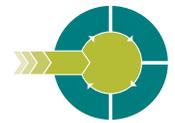
A difficult conversation is typically associated with three characteristics:

- **High stakes:** the two parties are dealing with important issues
- **Strong emotion:** participants may become angry, disappointed or upset
- **Different opinions:** the two parties in the conversation may disagree.

A common example of a difficult conversation is providing performance feedback. High quality professional feedback develops and sustains high quality leadership, teaching quality and learning, and underpins effective goal setting and professional development. High quality feedback conversations provide teachers with clear information on where and how to make meaningful improvements to their practice. However, school principals report having difficulty providing meaningful feedback and engaging teachers in productive conversations about performance. The *New role, new conversations* framework overleaf outlines five key steps to conducting a difficult conversation within a school context.

'What capacity do we need as leaders to demonstrate authenticity and build credibility and trust? One of the most critical is our ability and willingness to engage in challenging, difficult, sensitive – in a word, courageous – conversations.'

Source: Ontario Ministry of Education (2013, p. 2)



Leadership scenarios

New role, new conversations

A framework for managing difficult conversations



Figure 2: New role, new conversations framework



Step 1

Cultivate a learning and feedback culture

A positive and consistent learning and feedback culture can encourage staff across the school to improve their teaching practice through shared and individual reflection and professional learning. It can lead to regular dialogue in which teachers explore the challenges they encounter within the classroom and look for ways of enhancing their approach to teaching. Staff can be motivated to work together to observe, support and constructively challenge each other.

Making improvement habitual and expected makes it easier to have conversations about what behaviours need to be changed. It makes it more likely that practice will improve and less likely that poor practice becomes entrenched.

'The concept of a collaborative school culture invites all to be part of something bigger than themselves; it is the ultimate professional development mechanism.'

Source: Gruenert & Whitaker (2015)

Engaging in performance and development



Encouraging collaboration for continual improvement

A learning and feedback culture encourages open conversations and develops positive attitudes towards professional learning. Creating a feedback rich culture requires safe and trusting relationships that are developed over time.

Effective professional conversations



A school leader plays a key role in encouraging genuine conversations and constructive feedback. Conversations about performance improvement should be a routine part of your everyday conversation, not just giving feedback but also seeking it and talking often about how you are improving your own practice. Daily conversations about performance help to create and drive a high performance culture.

A coaching culture within a school encourages colleagues to collaborate to improve student learning and teacher practice. Classroom observation and associated coaching strategies that can drive a coaching culture include:

- **instructional coaching:** a leader or principal working with a team to model, observe and coach
- **peer observation:** teachers observing and learning from one another, including providing constructive feedback to each other.

'Teachers learn from each other and share good teaching practices through a range of opportunities at school and system levels. Observing and giving feedback on each other's practice is the norm.'

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria (2013, p. 13)

Coaching



Classroom observation strategies





Establishing a common language for feedback

School leaders should lead the development of a common language for feedback, and shape how it is given and received. Feedback includes both praise and constructive criticism and is most effectively conducted in a context in which teachers play an active role in their self assessment and in professional performance dialogue.

It is helpful to talk openly about expected frequency of feedback, suitable reactions and how to act on feedback received. Feedback doesn't have to be a complex and process driven activity. By emphasising the importance of development and feedback, school leaders can encourage feedback to happen more frequently and openly, not just in formal performance feedback meetings.

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* and AITSL's *Classroom Practice Continuum* articulate what quality teaching practice looks like across multiple career stages. They support the development of a common language and shared understanding for evaluation and feedback. These resources can be used to evaluate professional proficiency, deliver constructive feedback and set professional learning goals.

'The focus must shift from helping individuals become more effective in their isolated classrooms and schools, to creating a new collaborative culture.'

Source: Dufour & Marzano (2011, p. 67)

'If feedback is something that happens only when something's gone wrong, it'll never really be an organic part of the organisational culture. It has to show up in everyday life.'

Source: Batista (2013)

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers



Classroom Practice Continuum



Establishing clear behavioural expectations for staff

As part of cultivating a learning and feedback culture, goals and expectations for staff should be developed. Collaborating with staff to make expected behaviour explicit will help achieve buy in and lead to more consistent implementation. These expectations should be clearly documented and presented.

It is important to determine whether formalised guidelines and documents already exist at the school and ensure that all staff have access. These guidelines should outline expectations and formalised processes for performance, development and feedback. They should set out the steps to be taken if someone fails to make the progress expected or behaves in a way that is incompatible with expectations. Processes described should range from early stage efforts to improve and rectify, through to formal procedures. Most education systems or organisations provide standard procedures to follow.

'Neutrality is best preserved by a school leader who demonstrates significant interpersonal skills in managing a conversation and who works within frameworks and processes that are transparent.'

Source: Kearns (2011, p. 104)



Step 2

Prepare for the difficult conversation

Preparation is essential if you are to have a difficult conversation with a staff member. It will help ensure the conversation is conducted in an appropriate and effective manner. Being well prepared for a difficult conversation enables the focus to be on listening to the other person and on the discussion, rather than mentally preparing for what to say next.

Collecting and considering information

To avoid prejudging, information about the situation should be considered before and during the conversation. Approaching the conversation from a non judgemental point of view demonstrates willingness to listen to the other person's views.

When people make judgements, they are subject to a range of cognitive biases, each of which can be addressed by considering all the available information:

- **Confirmation bias** is a bias towards confirming one's existing beliefs, and involves a focus on information that supports one's perspective and ignores alternative explanations.
- **Recency bias** occurs when an individual tends to remember and rely significantly more on the latest information, compared to older data.
- **Stereotyping** occurs when someone expects a group or person to have certain qualities without collecting accurate information about them.
- **Bias blind spot** is the tendency to think we are less susceptible to biases than others.

Clarifying the nature of the conversation

The first step is to determine the issue to be discussed (e.g. consistently poor performance, critical feedback, inappropriate behaviour towards peers or students). Whatever the issue, the other person should be treated as a partner, not an opponent. Where appropriate, support and guidance from relevant resources should be sought (e.g. professional expertise within the school's network or system, the *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework*, the school's code of conduct or development guidelines). The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* also provide guidance on standards of performance and development. Use of appropriate resources ensures the process is consistent and predictable.





Adopting the right mindset

Understanding your mindset

Time spent reflecting on your attitude towards the situation and the people involved will help create the right mindset. This is important because how you think will affect how you feel, which in turn affects what you say and impacts your tone of voice and body language. This can send a strong and sometimes unintended message to others.

A 'difficult' conversation should be reframed as a 'constructive and collaborative' conversation about development. If handled well, these types of conversations can strengthen relationships and build trust. Being familiar with how to handle such conversations can help overcome discomfort or anxiety.

Understanding the other person's mindset

School leaders should take some time to think about the situation from the other person's perspective. The staff member is likely to have a rationale for their performance or the way they have behaved. To better understand the other person's perspective, it helps to take a few moments to reflect on what they are trying to achieve. Better understanding the other person's goals can provide common ground to have a productive conversation.

Developing an opening statement

The conversation should be started in a confident, positive and direct way. This sets the tone for the subsequent discussion. The opening statement should be no longer than 20-30 seconds long. It is best if the opening statement ends with a question; this invites the other person to engage in the conversation.

Checklist for difficult conversations



Anticipating and preparing for a range of reactions

People respond to a difficult conversation in a range of ways, some of which are outlined below. A range of factors can affect how positively or negatively someone responds to feedback.

Positive and open	Inquisitive: asking productive questions to clarify necessary changes Contribute: engaging in the conversation in a positive manner
Resistance or denial	Deny: denying or downplaying the impact their behaviour had or disputing the information Avoid: changing the subject, avoiding answers, avoiding you physically Mask: responding with humour, sarcasm, minimising the problem
Anger or aggression	Control: steering the conversation, cutting you off, interrupting Label: putting you or others in a box, making broad statements such as, 'they are always like that' Attack: making it personal, emotional outbursts, threats
Sadness or withdrawal	Cry: becoming tearful Withdraw: going silent, giving one word answers



A leader will be more prepared to handle a difficult conversation if they anticipate possible responses and any resistance they are likely to encounter. As part of preparation, it is a good idea to think through how more extreme emotional responses can be de-escalated.

Working with difficult staff



Considering how to phrase the conversation to maximise success

According to Social Judgement Theory, people have a pre-existing belief or opinion on a given subject that may be strong or mild. This is known as their anchor point and it determines whether they accept or reject an idea. The further the staff member's anchor point is from the leader's anchor point, the more likely it is that the staff member will reject or react negatively to the message in the conversation. Therefore, when preparing for a difficult conversation, a leader should consider the other person's current view on the topic and tailor messages to minimise the likelihood of inciting resistance.



Step 3

Engage in the difficult conversation

Creating a positive conversation environment

Important conversations should be conducted in a positive and safe space to ensure privacy and put both parties at ease. A school leader plays a key role in creating an environment of psychological safety for the difficult conversation. There are two fundamental requirements to make it safe:

- **Mutual purpose:** both parties believe they are working towards a common goal in the conversation and care about the goals, interests and values of the other.
- **Mutual respect:** both parties respect each other. Where mutual respect exists, active listening by both parties occurs and there is acknowledgement of feelings, perspectives and differences without judgement.

A difficult conversation should be conducted face to face. There should be little chance of interruptions. Both the school leader and staff member should have sufficient time available for the conversation to allow a proper discussion and exploration of ideas.

A positive environment is assisted when a leader avoids common mistakes in providing feedback.

Mistakes commonly made when providing feedback

1. We judge individuals, not actions.
2. We provide feedback that is too vague.
3. We provide feedback which speaks for others.
4. We provide feedback that is exaggerated with generalities.
5. We provide feedback that goes on for too long.
6. We make assumptions about our counterpart's intentions.
7. We avoid the conversation.
8. We lose sight of the goal or purpose of the conversation.
9. We rush to get the conversation over with.
10. We only focus on the issue or the negative.
11. We fail to provide suggestions for improvement.





Structuring the conversation

Using a model to structure the conversation is an effective way to address the issue in a judgement free way and helps to facilitate effective outcomes.

The Center for Creative Leadership's Situation-Behaviour-Impact model provides a simple and direct technique for giving feedback:

- **Situation:** Name the issue and describe the situation. This means defining the time and place of the situation, which puts the feedback in context.
For example: 'During the staff meeting on Tuesday afternoon...'
- **Behaviour:** Describe the observable behaviour to be discussed: what was seen or heard. This allows the other person to know what they did that had an impact.
For example: '...you were on your phone when we were discussing...'
- **Impact:** Explain the effect of the behaviour on yourself or others and what may be at stake for the school, peers, students, etc. It is important to focus on the behaviour and impact, without criticising the person. This focuses attention on the issue, not the person.

For example: '...it made me feel disrespected, and meant that you were not fully present for the critical information shared about our new policy which may end up impacting on students' learning.'

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

'Performers can only adjust their performance successfully if the information fed back to them is stable, accurate, and trustworthy.'

Source: Wiggins (2012)

'Situation ... anchors feedback in time, place and circumstances helps the receiver remember and/or understand the context.'

Source: Center for Creative Leadership (n.d)

During the discussion, 'I' language should be used, which helps minimise the perception of blaming the other person. It is also recommended to avoid generalisations, such as 'always' or 'never' as these lack credibility and justification.

This should be followed by questions and space for the other person to articulate their point of view. A school leader should maintain an open mind and listen to the other person's response without interruption before providing their perspective. To show the other person they have been heard, main points from the conversation should be summarised and repeated, and clarification should be sought to check that the conversation has been correctly interpreted. It is also important to validate that what the other person has said is a reasonable and acceptable opinion.

If a conversation feels as though it is becoming highly emotional or out of control, it is possible that the other person is misinterpreting the conversation as a personal attack. Low self esteem, poor prior experience or anxiety can make this more likely. Tension can be decreased by affirming commitment to the relationship and expressing desire to jointly develop a solution. If the person continues to become emotional or angry, a school leader should not mirror their emotions. This can escalate the situation and lead the conversation away from the core issue. The best thing to do is to remain calm and be patient with any reaction.

'We often react to a provoking statement by thinking or exclaiming 'That doesn't make sense!' Instead, listen, empathise and wait. Don't try to use rational viewpoints until the person begins speaking from a less emotional perspective.'

Source: Novick (2015)



Agreeing actions

The next step is to clarify and agree on future actions. This involves describing what change is needed, checking that the issue is understood, asking the other person's opinion and determining what steps will be taken.

'It is perhaps ironic that the key skill most necessary in a challenging conversation is listening, not speaking.'

Source: Kearns (2011, p. 118)

Describing what should be done differently

It is helpful to describe how the other person could behave differently. People respond best to detailed, objective feedback that can be acted on as it provides direction on where improvement should be focused and what is expected. It may be helpful to provide an example of how the preferred behaviour would look in the situation previously described. Specific examples enable staff members to set concrete targets for improvement.

Checking for understanding and asking their opinion

Key points should be reiterated to support a shared view: ask the staff member to summarise their understanding of the key outcomes of the meeting. This provides the person with the opportunity to actively engage in the discussion and promotes self reflection. It is important to ask the staff member receiving the feedback for their opinion. Solutions that can address both the school leader's and staff member's concerns should be explored.

Reaching consensus and agreeing next steps

After options have been discussed, both parties should agree a way forward. The next steps should be formalised with realistic goals, commitments and timeframes. It is also important for a school leader to agree how and when to follow up on the conversation.

The questions listed below can be used to agree and commit to future action:

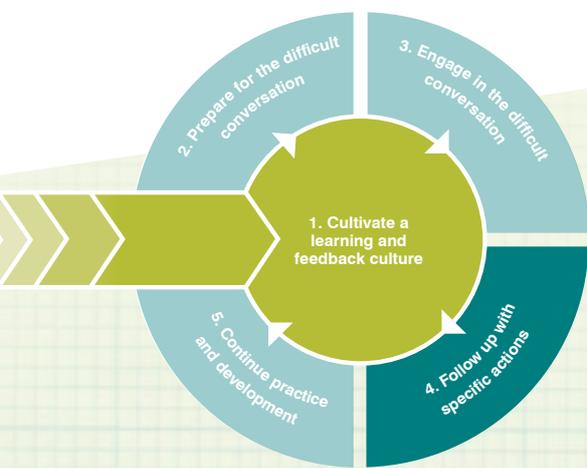
- Which option will you take to achieve your target?
- What are your next steps?
- When will you take them?
- What might get in the way and how will you deal with it?
- Who do you need to support you and how will you enlist their support?
- What can I do to help you achieve your target?
- How will you keep track of your progress?
- What will it look like when you achieve your target?

Source: Landsberg, M (2003)

You should reflect on the conversation. The skill of conducting a difficult conversation is a skill that can be refined and improved with practice. The following questions can be used to guide your reflection:

- How do you feel after the discussion?
- Have you got what you wanted from the conversation?
- Was a positive relationship maintained?
- Is there anything different you would do next time to make the conversation even better?

Getting a message across to others will not occur fully in a single conversation. Regular conversations generate additional insights and allow the school leader and staff member to discuss progress. Frequent, constructive conversations about development drive a learning and feedback culture in a school.



Step 4

Follow up with specific actions

Documenting and sharing

Immediately afterwards, the conversation should be documented and key agreements shared. This demonstrates the importance of the feedback and development process to others. It also provides a helpful record of the conversation to refer to in future.

The document should include:

- date and time of discussion
- who was present
- issues discussed
- agreed actions
- next steps.

This summary should be shared promptly with the staff member, including a request for their feedback. This helps to confirm that there is still buy in to the agreed next steps. Additionally, if the provision of additional support for the staff member was agreed (e.g. training, mentoring and/or peer observation), it is vital that this is put in place without delay.

Following up as agreed

At the agreed time, progress should be discussed with the staff member. Scheduling this immediately after the initial meeting will be helpful. This will ensure follow up is not forgotten and the team member can prepare for the meeting.

During this follow up meeting, progress towards the agreed targets should be discussed. If the staff member has not made sufficient progress, reasons underlying this should be explored. A school leader should listen carefully to the staff member's explanation to understand whether the lack of progress is to do with the difficulty of the goal, degree of support provided, time constraints or limited personal capacity.

Adjusting commitment and discussing next steps

If required, targets, timeframes and support structures should be readjusted and agreed upon. Check that the staff member understands and is in agreement with the new commitments as it is vital that both parties concur.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the consequences of failing to improve against agreed targets should be clearly outlined. These consequences and their timing should be noted and the next date for review agreed.



Step 5

Continue practice and development

Continued practice and professional learning builds your capability and confidence to engage appropriately and effectively in future difficult conversations.

Accessing professional learning

To further focus on developing the interpersonal skills that support effectively dealing with difficult conversations, school leaders should invest in professional learning opportunities. Professional learning involves developing awareness and competencies, and refining practices. Relevant training resources and programs may focus on conflict resolution, managing difficult stakeholders or practising difficult conversations.

Seeking collegiate support

Drawing on the expertise of a coach, peer or mentor to prepare for a difficult conversation may be useful. This offers the opportunity to share useful strategies and hear how others have handled similar conversations. Ask to practise opening statements or test different approaches prior to having a difficult conversation; a coach, peer and/or mentor can provide honest feedback and reflections regarding possible approaches. With this support, it is possible to improve skills to better conduct difficult conversations.

Acting as a role model

By actively supporting and modelling development of self and others, you can cultivate a rich and thriving learning and feedback culture. This also means ensuring expectations are regularly and clearly communicated to everyone in the school and reinforced with all new staff members who join the school.

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