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Australian Institute
for Teaching and
School Leadership
Limited

New role, new vision

A school leader's guide

Contents

This guide for school leaders has been produced in collaboration with 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.

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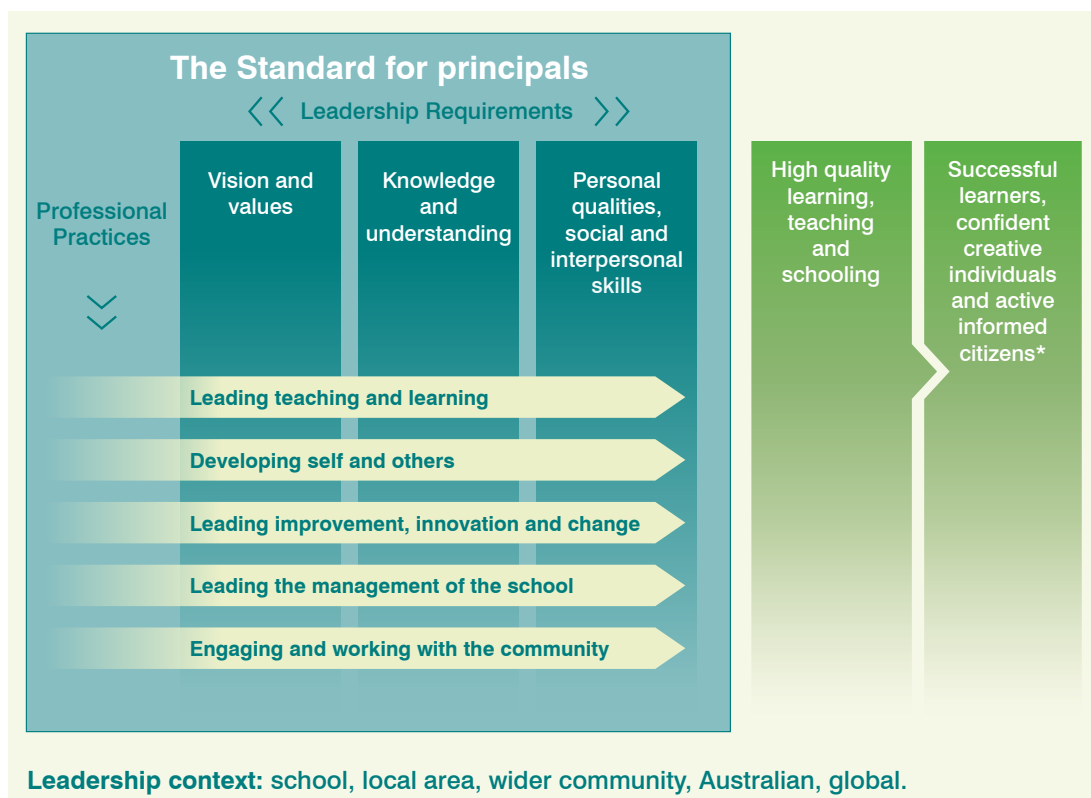This icon indicates a link to a resource

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 in understanding and dealing 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 the five areas of professional practice.

The Standard for principals

⟨⟨ Leadership Requirements ⟩⟩

Professional Practices ⌄

| Vision and values | Knowledge and understanding | Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills | High quality learning, teaching and schooling | Successful learners, confident creative individuals and active informed citizens* |

Leading teaching and learning

Developing self and others

Leading improvement, innovation and change

Leading the management of the school

Engaging and working with the community

Leadership context: school, local area, wider community, Australian, global.

Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

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

New role, new vision

New role, new vision, focuses on the development and implementation of an updated or new vision and values for the school, in particular:

- understanding the school context and personal values

- collaborating to review the vision and values

- aligning vision and actions

- reflecting, recognising and refreshing.

Importance of a clear direction for the school

Clarity around a school's vision and values inspires, aligns and guides behaviours and decision making. It unites all members of the school community to work towards a common purpose. It brings both commitment and coherence to the day-to-day work of the school, providing a depth of understanding about what is most important and why.

- Vision includes ambitious, long-term goals for the school, and a vivid, engaging and specific description of an achievable future world in which the school will operate.

- Values are the essential and enduring tenets of the school – the 'non-negotiables'.

Many school leaders will inherit their vision and values. New school leaders may want to make these their own and recalibrate the school's direction in a way that reflects their personal style and priorities. To do this well, it is important to honour the history of the school as well as to build momentum for further improvement.

Testing the school's direction requires leaders to know their school's context. Informed judgement and good relationships should help school leaders choose the right pace for their context. The degree of urgency will depend on the needs of the school.

The best vision is built with the school community. This collaborative process is more complex and takes longer, but it results in a vision that is easier to understand and more inspiring.

> 'Today, vision is a familiar concept, but when you look carefully you find that most 'visions' are one person's (or group's) vision imposed on an organisation. Such visions, at best, command compliance – not commitment. A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to, because it reflects their own personal vision.'
>
> Source: Peter Senge (1990, p. 206-207)

Many highly effective schools revisit their vision on a regular basis. Employers often specify three or four year cycles to ensure relevance to the current school and wider context. Keeping in touch with environmental or contextual changes can help school leaders to identify the signals that suggest a review of the school's vision might be necessary.

The *New role, new vision* framework overleaf outlines four steps to developing an inspiring vision. In an ideal situation all four steps would be carried out, but there will be instances where immediate action is required and a new school leader should prioritise accordingly. Instances will also occur where a school leader will need to return to or repeat specific steps.

New role, new relationships school leader's guide
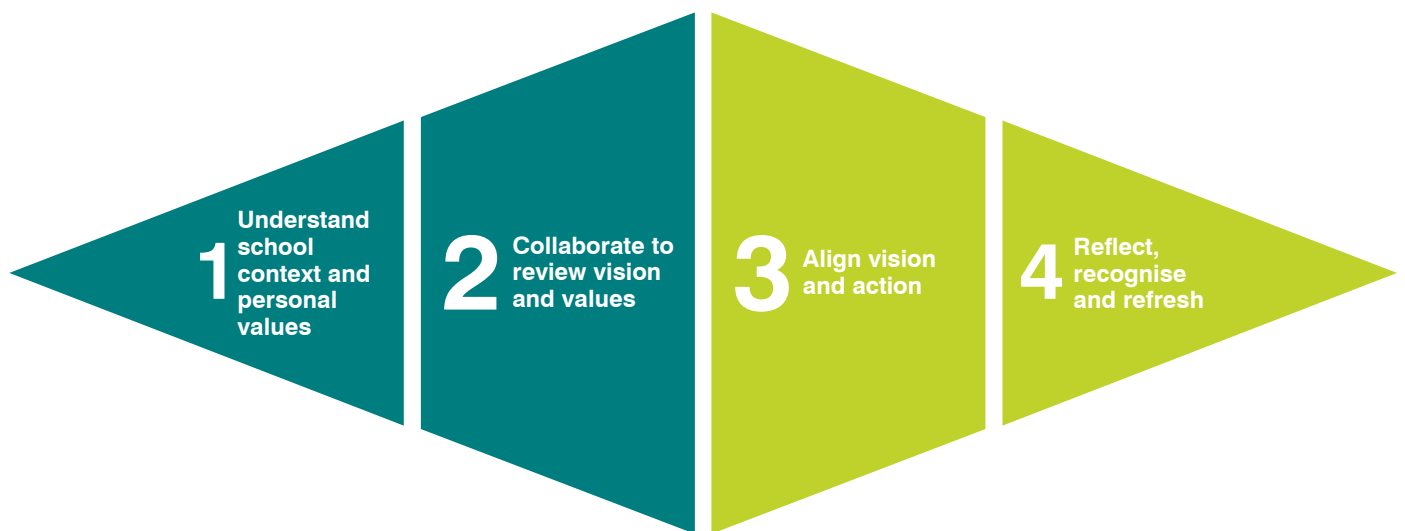
Leadership scenarios

New role, new vision

A framework for developing an inspiring vision and school culture

1 Understand school context and personal values

2 Collaborate to review vision and values

3 Align vision and action

4 Reflect, recognise and refresh

Figure 2: 'New role, new vision' framework

Step 1

Understand school context and personal values

Understanding the school's specific context is integral for new school leaders when creating a clear direction for the future. The school's history, culture and past successes and challenges have shaped its current vision and values. In addition, a school leader's own personal experiences and values will affect how they perceive the school and shape the type of vision and values required to deliver success.

Understanding current and future context

Each school leader must understand where their school is coming from and what it is aiming to achieve. A clear direction is evidenced by a school's vision that is aligned with its current and future context. The direction should also be underpinned by a deep understanding of the needs and expectations of the school's students, families and community.

Both qualitative and quantitative data help a new leader understand past performance and future trajectory against the vision and values. Quantitative sources can include student achievement and attendance data, financial records, family survey results, changing demographic needs and rates of staff turnover.

Qualitative data should be drawn from the school community to build a rich picture of the school culture and context. School leaders can ask staff, students, families and the broader community questions such as:

- What are the school's current vision and values?

- How is the vision articulated, monitored and sustained?

- How are the vision and values reflected in daily school life?

- What do community members value about this school?

Responses to these questions should help school leaders develop a much better sense of their school to determine whether the vision and values resonate as well as inform performance. Throughout these discussions and analysis, school leaders must constantly test their developing perception of the school's current and future context against the overarching goal of best outcomes for students and staff.

Articulating personal values and understanding their importance

A school leader's own experience and beliefs shape their unique approach to leadership and will shape the school's vision and values. Understanding how personal values are related to and crossover with the school's context will help to ensure alignment and enable success.

> 'Don't rush the vision statement; doing so leads to scepticism, stress, and distrust, which will lead to a statement that will eventually be ignored.'
>
> _____
>
> Source: Gabriel & Farmer (2009, p. 47)

> 'Visions are not one size fits all. Each change has different objectives, stakeholders, challenges and opportunities. To deliver the best results with the least waste, investment in developing a vision should be tightly targeted at which is required to deliver the overall goal.'
>
> _____
>
> Source: Nous Group (2016a, p. 1)

School leaders should consider their personal beliefs about:

- **Moral purpose:** Why do I do what I do? What is the purpose of education?

- **Philosophy:** What do I believe about the best way to improve student outcomes and experience?

- **Priorities:** How will different demands be prioritised? Will types of school or program initiatives take precedence over others?

- **Risk preferences:** Are there things to rule out because of the risks involved? Are there benefits in being less risk-averse?

The Standard and the Leadership Profiles outline how school leaders are expected to translate vision and values into their day-to-day practice. The Interactive Leadership Profiles provide school leaders with resources for professional growth. These resources relate to a school leader's own, and their school's, vision and values.

AITSL's Interactive Leadership Profiles

Step 2

Collaborate to review vision and values

Completing Step 1 will provide school leaders with a good sense of how much change is required. There are several other environmental triggers that may also suggest change is required. These can include:

- a decline in school performance, student outcomes or satisfaction

- failure to deliver on the school's annual strategy or plan

- significant school growth or decline

- changes in government or policy

- school, education sector or departmental structural, or strategic shifts

- disruption in environment (e.g. technology, work practices, new teaching methods).

> 'Visions are exhilarating. They create the spark, the excitement that lifts the organisation out of the mundane.'
>
> Source: Senge (1990, p. 194)

Determining the degree of change required

School leaders must consider whether they need to reinforce, refresh, reframe or redevelop the school's vision. This judgement will drive the next steps required.
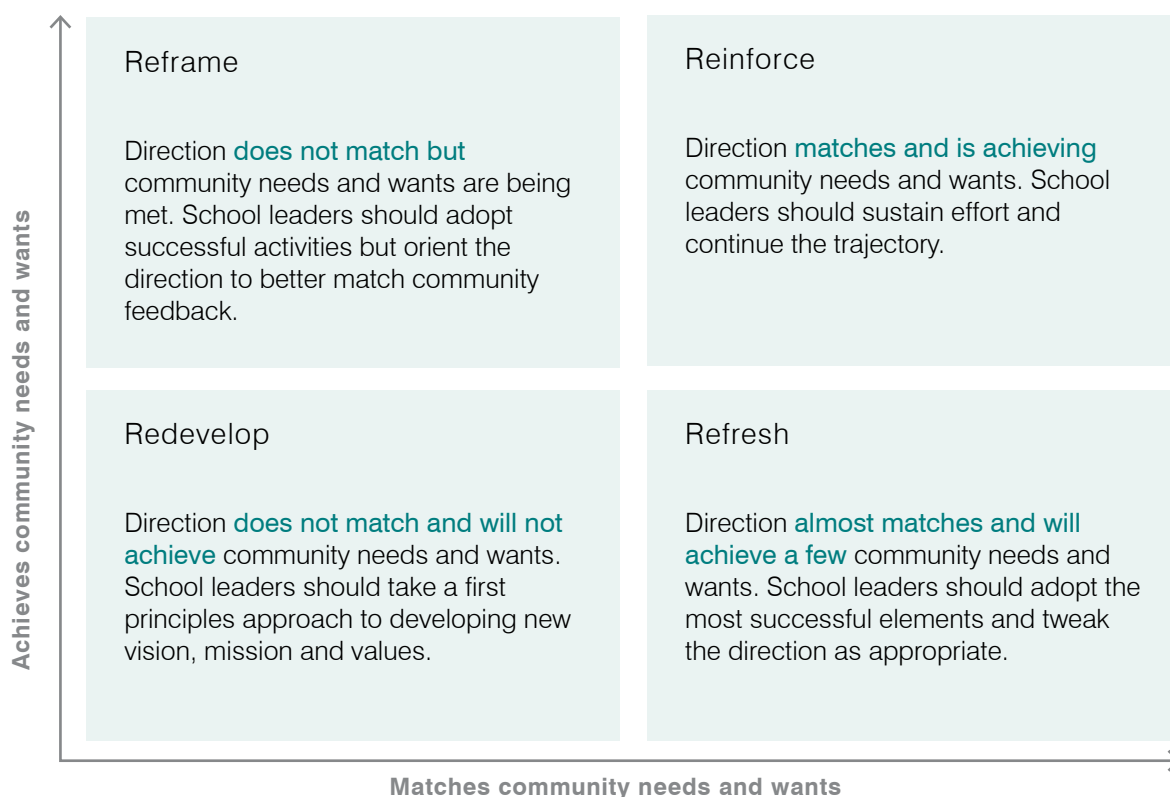

Achieves community needs and wants

Reframe

Direction does not match but community needs and wants are being met. School leaders should adopt successful activities but orient the direction to better match community feedback.

Reinforce

Direction matches and is achieving community needs and wants. School leaders should sustain effort and continue the trajectory.

Redevelop

Direction does not match and will not achieve community needs and wants. School leaders should take a first principles approach to developing new vision, mission and values.

Refresh

Direction almost matches and will achieve a few community needs and wants. School leaders should adopt the most successful elements and tweak the direction as appropriate.

Matches community needs and wants

Figure 3: Reinforce, refresh, reframe or redevelop

Changing the vision and values

School leaders must remain open about the possibilities for the school's new vision and values. While the understanding from Step 1 should inform this process, it shouldn't limit it. The following process outlines three stages school leaders should follow.

Engage broadly across the school system to gather input

The greatest buy-in for redevelopment of the school's vision and values occurs when the school community is authentically engaged throughout the development process. This engagement should take into account the full range of school community, giving students, families, staff and wider community members a greater sense of ownership and investment in the school's future.

There are a range of techniques school leaders can use to engage with different groups:

- **For staff:** use a staff survey, staff meetings and focused discussions

- **For students:** use interactive techniques, such as a visual wall, where students can develop drawings to portray their vision for the school

- **For families and the school community:** use surveys, existing parent committees and facilitated discussion sessions with the school leadership team.

The types of questions school leaders should ask in this stage are more future-focused than those used during Step 1 and could include the following:

- What does the ideal version of the school look like?

- What should the school be focused on for the next 2-3 years?

- What may challenge the school vision and values?

- How receptive is the school community to a change in the school's direction?

Convene an inclusive group to develop criteria and ideate possibilities

School leaders can convene a representative group to integrate insights from the broader consultation process. This group might include members of the leadership team, social influencers, family members, staff and student representatives (depending on the size of the school).

This step requires the development of an agreed list of criteria which will be used to develop and test potential vision and values statements. Use a working session to bring together the group to brainstorm ideas to shape the school's vision and values. Once several options have been developed, test each option against the agreed criteria. The evaluation of options will help to ensure that the new vision and values resonate and reinforce support for the vision that is agreed.

Design thinking comes of age

Vision, leadership and change

How to write a mission statement

Agree on future vision and values

After the group has agreed on a draft vision and values, they can test it with a broader group of stakeholders. Ensure that it is tested with a sample of students, families, staff and community representatives. Widespread agreement on the school's direction, in particular by the leadership team, increases the chance of it having a real and lasting impact for the community.

Changes to the school's vision and values may bring some disagreement, even though the engagement process is intentionally inclusive. A strong focus on buy-in and consistent messaging from leaders and social influencers will help to champion changes. Early identification of these "change champions" is paramount.

Finally, school leaders must remember to use their judgement for tough calls. Leadership requires courage and willingness to make difficult decisions. The school community will look to the school leader's behaviour and decisiveness when the need arises.

'Identifying with an entity larger than oneself, expands the self, with powerful consequences. Enlarged identity and commitment are the social glue that enable large organisations to cohere.'

Source: Fullan (2008, p. 49)

AITSL Interactive Leadership Profiles – vision and values

Step 3

Align vision and action

A change in direction will have implications for the different elements of a school's day-to-day operation. Successful implementation requires that all these elements are aligned with the vision. Communication is also crucial for turning a vision into action.

Assessing alignment and planning for implementation

Successful implementation requires that practices, procedures and structures across the school are optimised for pursuing the new direction. For example, the strategic plan, performance and development cycle, and professional learning should all align with the school's vision. Listening to feedback will help to identify where the implementation process can be improved and where obstacles may arise. School leaders need to be agile and pragmatic. Implementation should be a consistent and iterative approach.

Leaders can mobilise their influence and authority to deliver on the vision and values in seven key ways (Nous Group, 2016a).

> 'Moral purpose and sustained performance of an organisation are mutually dependent. Leaders in a culture of change realise this.'
>
> Source: Fullan (2001, p. 28)

Leadership commitment

Engage the leadership team to inspire the community about the school's direction. This can be done by:

- clarifying expectations and holding leaders to account for modelling behaviours

- encouraging leaders to actively consult with staff about the values and behaviours

- encouraging leaders to communicate with staff about impact

- seeking commitment from leaders to drive cultural change.

What's modelled

Attitudes and behaviours

Make clear what attitudes and behaviours are desired to encourage people to hold themselves and others to account. Clear and regular communication creates a shared understanding of the vision, values and culture.

What's expected

Workforce capability

Ensure all staff are equipped with the capabilities that enable them to support implementation of the new vision and values. This personal development should focus on different groups in the school, from formal leaders through to the broader workforce.

- **Formal leaders** set expectations on how to behave; staff will be guided by what they say, do, recognise and prioritise.

- **Informal leaders**, such as influential and respected staff members, are critical in complementing the work of formal leaders. Staff often look to informal leaders for direction on how to behave or react to the new environment.

- **Broader workforce** development is worth the effort as it ensures consistency in behaviours across the school and sets the same standard throughout the school.

Who's equipped

Recognition and consequences

Recognise and reinforce behaviour that supports the school's vision and values and addresses poor behaviours. Clear responsibility and accountability is crucial to success, but agreed values and behaviours must be meaningfully reinforced through recognition and consequences. This can be done by:

- **holding people to account for** their behaviour to champion relevant projects and adopt new ways of working

- **checking on progress** regularly to ensure it is on track and the desired rate of change is occurring

- **recognising and celebrating** when members of the school community demonstrate agreed behaviours.

What's reinforced

Practices and procedures

Ensure that policies, practices and procedures are aligned to the school's direction to instil habitual behaviours. Daily routines then support the school's direction.

What's habitual

Underpinning structures

Ensure that school leadership structures, the physical layout and digital investment enables the vision and values. No matter how much effort school leaders and other staff devote to implement change, if the enabling structures - like governance, technology, facilities and timetables - at the school are not aligned to the new direction, no change will occur.

What enables

Measurement and evolution

School leaders should create a process to measure and report on progress that delivers early insights into the success of the implementation approach. This enables the school to explore what went well and what improvements to make in the future.

What's measured

The five dysfunctions of a team

School culture

The change

Communicate the vision and values convincingly

Successful communication is necessary regardless of the degree of change to the vision and values. When it comes to implementation, school leaders should invest time and resources on developing a convincing story around them.

School leaders should also tailor their communication approach according to the needs of different members of the school community. For example:

- **staff** can be reached through regular meetings, emails and face-to-face conversations

- **students** can be reached via teachers, school assemblies and internal communication

- **families** can be reached through formal and informal communication channels

- **governing bodies** can be reached through formal communication channels

- **local community** can be reached through newsletters or bulletins, and by inviting them to public events at the school such as fetes or open days.

Incorporating the vision and values into induction processes for new staff, new pupils and new parents is another effective way to ensure all school community members understand what is expected of them. This should be followed up by demonstrating the right culture through decision making and holding people to account for their behaviour through performance and development processes.

Step 4

Reflect, recognise and refresh

School life is busy. Maintaining the momentum of a new or updated vision ensures the school is always moving in the right direction. Identifying what changes are working and what needs more support, then modifying the implementation approach is crucial to sustaining progress.

Reflection and celebration of success is a proven way to reinforce support for the vision and values. Planning for quick wins provides milestones for people to compare progress against and provides evidence that the new direction is worth the effort.

Formal and informal leaders should regularly communicate how the implementation of the new vision and values is going. This helps to maintain trust in the process. Informal communication practices and behaviours can work, but given that frequent, timely, accurate communication is critical to embedding a new direction, school leaders often find formal communication most useful. The school community must remain aware of how the school is progressing, how new information will change the school's approach to its vision and values, and how their contribution might need to change.

'Is the motivating force one which is focused in a way which serves the shared values of the school community, or is it aimed at serving personal ends and priorities? To what extent is the focus a shared one? Reflection on the issues raised by these questions provides an opportunity for school principals and their school communities to clarify their value position and examine the motivating force which inspires them.'

Source: Dimmox (2008, p. 108)

References and suggested reading

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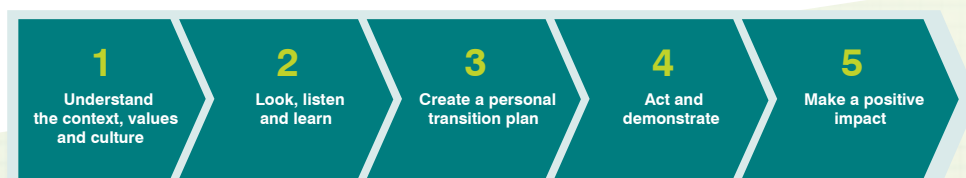
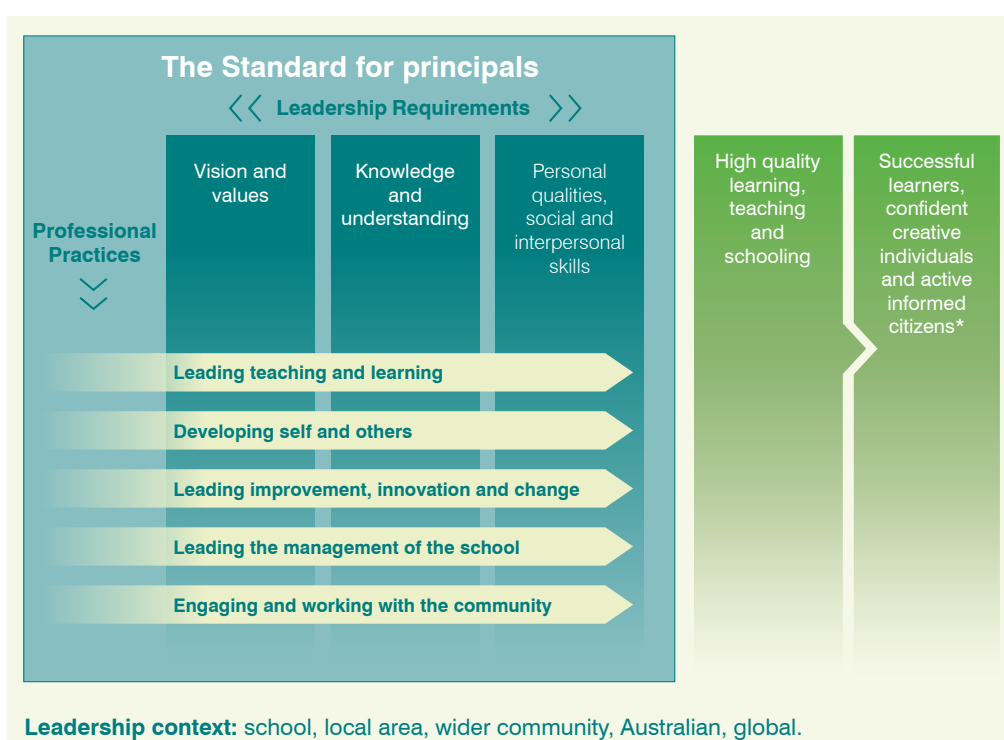This icon indicates a link to a resource.

Introduction

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The Standard for principals

⟨⟨ **Leadership Requirements** ⟩⟩

| **Professional Practices** ⌄ | Vision and values | Knowledge and understanding | Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills | High quality learning, teaching and schooling | Successful learners, confident creative individuals and active informed citizens* |

Leading teaching and learning

Developing self and others

Leading improvement, innovation and change

Leading the management of the school

Engaging and working with the community

Leadership context: school, local area, wider community, Australian, global.

Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals
Source: Australian Professional Standard for Principals, AITSL (2014)

New role, new relationships

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

- understanding the context of the school

- modelling effective leadership

- working with and through others to make a positive impact on the school.

The transition to school leadership

While transition to the role of principal can be an exciting opportunity, it can also be challenging. New principals often experience feelings of isolation and loneliness. This experience of professional isolation often stems from the responsibilities associated with the new role, coupled with the need to respond to new expectations, form new relationships and operate in a position of ambiguity.

Australian school leaders typically progress to the principalship from the classroom or other senior leadership positions. While they have usually gained significant teaching and school management experience, a senior leadership position in a school does not necessarily fully prepare a teacher to take on the role of principal.

> 'The future for the principal can be exciting and profoundly significant for school and system improvement.'
> **Source: Fullan (2014, p. 7)**

Key challenges new principals face

New school leaders are in a good position to appraise current performance with fresh eyes and identify how the school needs to develop further. It takes time, however, to ease into a new role and gain sufficient insight to know what improvements are most needed and how best to achieve them. Transitions can also be a time of greater vulnerability, as the individual learns the role and establishes new working relationships.

Research suggests the average time to transition to a new school leadership position is similar to that of a corporate executive: about six months, though it will vary. The first three months are a critical time for new school leaders to understand their specific context and create the networks they need to succeed.

Successful school leaders rapidly gather information about the context, including the school's history, current performance and culture, to enable them to develop key relationships, communicate priorities, and motivate and lead others. A significant delay in establishing networks and relationships can be a key difficulty for a new leader. The typical behaviors associated with leaders who are successful and unsuccessful in transition are outlined in Table 1 overleaf.

> 'The transition holds promise for teachers that a new principal will maintain the positive aspects of the school and make changes for the better.'
> **Source: Pappas (2016, p. 1)**

Steps for a successful transition

Table 1: Behaviours of school leaders in transition

School leaders who make transitions successfully	School leaders who are less successful in transition
Possess (or rapidly acquire) knowledge and familiarity with the role, staff, students and community	Take too long to become familiar with the new environment and role
Recognise and develop key relationships with staff and students, deal skilfully with resistance and divided loyalties, build networks and show that they are team oriented	Focus on the tasks to be accomplished and neglect the development of relationships; work things out alone
Identify issues and opportunities and pull them into a vision to motivate staff	Pursue too many approaches at once without a persuasive strategy
Invest effort in building a strong leadership team and openly communicate about strategy and style of leadership	Accept unclear expectations from leadership team and other colleagues
Possess knowledge about change leadership and build confidence and trust with staff	Concentrate only on changes and thereby neglect staff needs for stability and security

Source: McKinney (2008)

Forming and maintaining relationships with staff, students and the community is a key to success. Relationship development enables new leaders to have a positive and lasting impact in their new school. The *New role, new relationships* framework overleaf outlines five key steps to building relationships and making a successful transition to school leadership.
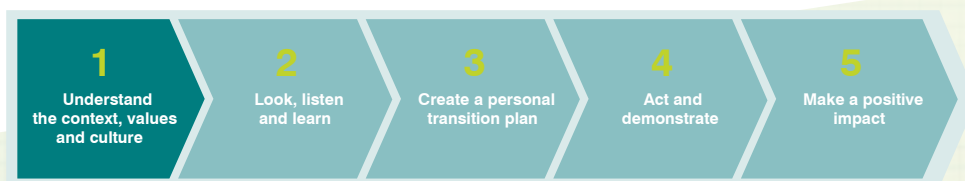
Leadership scenarios
New role, new relationships

A framework for building effective relationships

1 Understand the context, values and culture	2 Look, listen and learn	3 Create a personal transition plan	4 Act and demonstrate	5 Make a positive impact

Figure 2: New role, new relationships framework

Step 1
Understand the context, values and culture

A school leader's priority for the first few weeks, and even before arriving, should be to understand the context of the school: its history, culture and values, current performance, physical surroundings, policies and procedures and resources. To gain this understanding, new school leaders need to access good information quickly.

Information gathering

Information should be gathered from a range of sources, including performance and growth data, strategic and operational plans, organisational structure and school council or board minutes. Developing an understanding of the recent history of the school is also worthwhile. This can be achieved by talking with long serving staff, school council members and key figures within the community, and reading newsletters and other school documents.

'Schools have a history and it is your responsibility to understand that history as quickly as possible.'
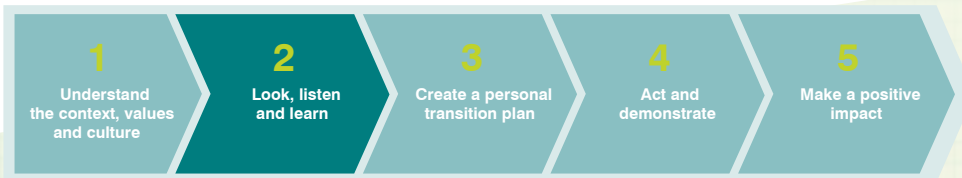**Source: Isaacson (2013, p. 19)**

Assumptions and biases

People sometimes unconsciously make biased judgements based on their own assumptions, previous experience and rules of thumb. The use of these mental shortcuts increases the speed and ease with which a decision can be made. This is natural, but school leaders should be aware of assumptions and biases that may influence their perspective when joining a new school. The following are some of the biases and mental shortcuts to be mindful of:

'It is vitally important to have information from different perspectives and different levels in an organisation. Just getting information from one person/place can lead to narrow, sub optimised decisions.'
Source: Rhoades (2015)

- **Pattern recognition**: when faced with a new school or leadership team, people often assume the new situation is likely to be similar to their previous experiences. This can inhibit information gathering, listening with an open mind and learning.

- **Confirmation bias**: confirmation bias occurs when a school leader looks for information that supports their beliefs and rejects information that goes against those beliefs. This can lead to decision making that does not consider all the facts.

- **First impression bias**: first impression bias is the tendency to jump to conclusions based on initial information or observations. This can limit consideration of other possibilities and lead to judgements that are made too quickly.

Step 2
Look, listen and learn

The highest priority in the first few weeks should be connecting with people across the school, listening and inquiring with an open mind, reflecting on information collected and learning from others. While it is difficult to resist the temptation to start action, it is best to suspend judgement and decisions.

Looking and listening

Observation can be a powerful way to collect information about a school. It includes explicit and general observations of how the school is functioning. For example, shadowing a number of students in their lessons can help you to understand the learner's experience and observing classroom practice can shine a light on teaching practice and pedagogical challenges. Observation can reveal what direction the school has taken, how things are being done, what the risks may be and where the opportunities lie.

> 'During your first year, it is ok… to observe more than to direct, to listen more than to speak.'
>
> **Source: Kellough & Hill (2015, p. 7)**

Listening provides information and insights from the people who will most directly impact a school leader's success in their new role. It shows what stakeholders expect of both the leader and the school. Listening to staff, students and parents can reveal valuable insights and help school leaders to fairly and accurately assess the situation. Leaders can then incorporate vital information into their decision making that may have otherwise been missed or overlooked.

It is useful to invite comments from others about the school's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. You can ask what is working; what is not working; what is frustrating; what should be stopped; what decisions are holding up progress. Investing time to listen to individuals in the school will help in the formation of ongoing, trusting relationships with staff members. Staff are likely to feel that their perspectives are valued and that they have been taken seriously, which can make them more open to suggestions for change.

School leaders may face criticisms and comparisons to previous leaders, but these can be used as an opportunity to listen and learn. Instead of feeling defensive, the best way to approach this conversation is as an open and honest discussion. Bohn (2013) suggests that engaging in these kinds of conversations provides school leaders with the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the current state of the school, clarify expectations of the school community and evaluate their vision and leadership style.

> 'Open, authentic, truthful dialogue, in an atmosphere of trust and respect, are the key ingredients that make meaningful change possible.'
>
> **Source: Ontario Ministry of Education (2013, p. 1)**

Questions to ask when gathering information

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 a staff member's anchor point is from the leader's anchor point, the more likely it is that they will reject or react negatively to a new idea. Looking and listening provides opportunity for the leader to determine staff members' anchor points on a range of subjects. These anchor points can be considered before the leader tailors messages to minimise the likelihood of inciting resistance.

Learning

Some new school leaders maintain a reflective diary to capture their insights, questions and observations during the transitionary phase. They draw on these reflections later when they are formulating priorities for the school.

You should reflect on what you do and don't know about yourself, the people, the culture and the school. This requires spending time appraising your own strengths and development needs and reviewing the information gathered, opinions heard and understanding gained from others. This reflection provides the opportunity to synthesise information from a wide range of sources.

Reflecting on the information gathered from steps 1 and 2 provides the opportunity to evaluate:

- school performance to date

- staff capability and capacity

- expectations of stakeholders.

This information can be used to make a professional judgement about whether any change is required, and the speed at which this change should occur.

Step 3
Create a personal transition plan

Once you understand the context, you can develop a clear personal transition plan, outlining key activities for the critical first three months.

In the first two phases, you will have learned about established, long term strategic plans and short term plans for implementation. If these plans are in place, you can use the first few months to learn about the school, its people and its culture. Based on this understanding, you can develop a plan outlining the key activities to be completed in the transition period. A personal transition plan enables you to structure your first three months on the job to ensure you are focused, proactive and prepared.

> 'High performing principals are not just born, but can be made.'
>
> **Source: Darling-Hammond (2007)**

Developing a plan

As part of planning for the first 90 days, the following should take priority:

a. **Determine personal entry goals:** It is recommended that you set between three and five personal goals for transition into the role. In setting these goals, you should consider what you stand for, what is important to you and what kind of impact you want to make.

b. **Prioritise relationship building:** A major focus of a transition plan should be to build a foundation of healthy relationships. Strong relationships are a critical element to ensuring a smooth transition. Relationships should be built with staff, peers outside the school, members of the community, families and students. You should consider:

- who the key stakeholders are
- which stakeholders may be harder to reach
- what their needs and expectations may be
- how to engage with each group
- what their current role, position and perspective may be
- when to arrange a conversation.

c. **Know how well the school is performing:** It is essential to understand data about student learning progress and attendance as well as staff absence and turnover. Comparative data from similar schools can provide a benchmark.

d. **Become familiar with standard operating procedures, policies and routines:** Learn how the school works. It is most important to understand procedures and policies concerning financial regulation, health and safety, emergency procedures, recruitment, staffing and performance management.

e. **Determine short term goals:** Set and communicate short term goals for the transition period, particularly those where early success can be achieved.

It is often helpful to break a personal transition plan into key transition milestones. These can be daily, weekly or monthly.

Major events in the school calendar should be included in the transition plan and used to increase visibility and connect with students and families. For instance:

- parent teacher interviews provide an opportunity to be visible and available to chat informally with parents as they move between interviews

- school council or board meetings provide an opportunity to share goals and discuss resource allocation

- school carnivals, sports days and other whole school events allow a school leader to mingle with staff, students and families in a relaxed environment.

Explaining key elements of the transition plan to staff members can help them understand the school leader's actions during the initial phase and signal that the focus of attention is on understanding the school.

Personal transition plan template

Step 4
Act and demonstrate

New school leaders should work hard to build relationships and engage with staff members, students and families. This will develop a richer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and support work with staff to develop collaborative goals and priorities for the future.

In this initial phase, barriers to success can be identified and resolved. All staff members can participate in the articulation of goals and priorities. From day one, it is vital to act as a role model to others by demonstrating appropriate actions, values and behaviours.

Building and maintaining relationships

Bradt et. al. (2009) argue that 'The heart of leadership is relationships. If you can't connect with others, you can't lead them'. However, it can sometimes be hard for a new school leader to form relationships with other teachers and staff in the school. Divided loyalties, lack of trust and fear of change can create tension and reservation.

Best practice suggests that new school leaders should:

- get to know staff members on a personal and professional level
- understand personal and professional drivers and goals for staff
- resist the urge to focus solely on work and instead invest in developing professional camaraderie
- encourage staff to build relationships with each other. This fosters feelings of cohesion and increases the likelihood of collaboration and engagement.

You should also avoid distancing yourself from staff, even if you feel it will increase your authority. The tendency to create distance increases feelings of isolation. This situation can be exacerbated if a colleague is unsupportive, increasing the challenge of forming and maintaining new relationships.

Visibility around school

Visibility and availability are particularly important when developing relationships with staff members, families and students. This involves being visible before, during and after school and in areas where students and teachers congregate. You can be present in the hallway or at the school gate before and after school or accompany different staff members on yard duty each week. This visibility demonstrates commitment to the school and an interest in students, staff and the community. It provides the opportunity for both students and staff to have easy access to the leader, to ask a question or share an opinion. Remembering and using names is a powerful way to demonstrate personal connection and show each individual that they matter.

Forging a strong leadership team

Leadership unity is critical to overall success. School leaders need to be able to trust and work effectively with the leadership team, so effort in building relationships, winning trust and resolving tensions is important. If an existing staff member unsuccessfully applied for the leader's role, there could be tension, resistance and divided loyalties. It is best to address these tensions directly and sensitively with the team member, and identify how best to work together constructively and supportively.

Recognising values and core principles

In determining goals and priorities for the school, a school leader should reflect on what values and principles they stand for in education as well as what they have learnt about the school. Leaders who clearly demonstrate the values they stand for will find they are more able to engage people in a constructive working relationship.

You should also involve staff members in discussions related to the school's current mission, vision and core values. This will provide insight into the rationale behind the school's priorities and offer an opportunity to articulate personal values and core principles. This transparency and openness will engage staff and help them to understand a new leader's mindset and actions.

Identifying goals and priorities

The process described here will make it possible to identify what the leader should focus on over the next 12-18 month period. This might be to:

- develop a feedback culture to improve teaching and learning

- identify and implement a program of professional learning

- develop partnerships with community members and external stakeholders

- review data management methods and technologies.

The nature of these early priorities will depend on the context of the school. In most cases, time can be taken to formulate priorities for the first year in a measured way. However, there will be times when swift action is required. These instances could include performance issues across the school, recurring complaints or dysfunctional processes. Once you have identified your priorities you can work with staff to define goals, resource allocation and timelines.

New leaders should not feel pressured to enact large scale change. If the school has recently experienced significant transformation or already has high student achievement, growth and staff satisfaction, it may be counterproductive to propose major changes.

Communicating clearly and regularly

Communication with stakeholders should occur consistently from the start of the transition process. It should be a two way process, providing staff, students and parents with opportunities to engage with a change process from initial planning through to implementation.

Setting norms about how others should behave

School leaders should clearly articulate their expectations of others and the norms that will become the habits and routines in the school. Norms provide a guide for 'how we do things around here' and clarify expectations. Without them, people are unsure of what is expected of them, leading to inconsistency in behaviour and feelings of uncertainty and confusion. Norms can be as simple as 'we arrive to staff meetings on time' or concern more complicated issues like what decisions should be handled by the leader and what decisions rest with the leadership team.

Articulating goals and priorities

Communicating and sharing goals and priorities helps to build support and commitment. In the absence of

information about the direction of change, people can become anxious and generate rumours, which can in turn create unnecessary resistance.

Dealing with resistance

The entry of a new leader can generate resistance from some staff members. While this will lessen over time, individual meetings to openly explore concerns should take place. These meetings can be used to discuss how to work together constructively in the future. It is important that a leader listens carefully to issues raised, as they can contain valuable insights that will help to refine approaches and understand genuine obstacles.

Empowering others and removing obstacles

It is essential to ensure others can participate in the day to day running of the school. Distributed leadership is an increasingly common approach to empowering others. It involves giving staff, parents and students the opportunity to be involved in decision making and lead change. Responsibility is delegated to others based on competencies, interests, aptitudes and skills. It builds the capacity of others to meet these responsibilities and helps create common values to guide behaviour. Leaders should check for barriers and remove obstacles to enable people to achieve the school's vision.

Acting as a role model

Staff members look to school leaders, particularly the principal, to benchmark their own behaviours. The leader's readiness to 'walk the talk' is one of the attributes most highly valued by staff members. Visible actions help staff members identify which attributes are valued and which behaviours they should replicate. If the leader's behaviour is consistent, it will act as a guide for staff members.

As with other elements of the leader's work, role modelling should respect school history and culture. While some change may be important, a school leader should acknowledge the school context and not change expectations in a way that suggests a lack of respect or understanding of the work that has been done previously. Acting in this way can create disunity and limit the possibility of future change.

By now, most new leaders will be moving towards fully adopting the roles, responsibilities and duties of school leader and formulating priorities for their first year. How these are communicated will influence how well they are
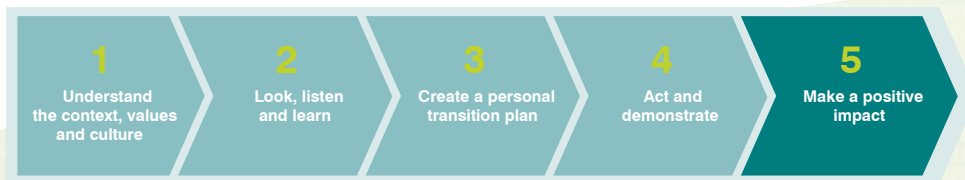
Step 5
Make a positive impact

received and implemented.

School leaders should continue to focus intensely and persistently on building relationships: it can take a long time to form genuine and purposeful relationships. All relationships require ongoing maintenance and, as they deepen, a leader will be more nuanced and successful in leading the school to secure improved learning outcomes and teaching practice.

Measuring, monitoring and persevering

In establishing your initial priorities, set a small number of goals as a reference point for assessing progress. These goals should be specific and measurable, and able to be achieved within a stated time period (SMART goals are one option). Seeking the views of students, staff and parents through surveys, one on one meetings and dedicated staff meetings will help measure progress and maintain engagement. Action to address early signs of difficulty will keep everyone focused on achieving success.

Celebrating success

When short term goals are reached, success should be shared and celebrated with staff members. Marking achievements will help avoid change fatigue, which can inhibit enthusiasm for further change and decrease motivation and effort.

Prioritising health and wellbeing

Taking on a new school leadership role can take a physical and emotional toll. Taking care of personal wellbeing as well as that of staff is essential. Maintaining your own physical and emotional health supports effective decision making and good judgement and enables sustained effort. At an organisation level, leaders who are healthy are perceived by others as more capable and engaged, and rate higher on various leadership indices.

Managing stress in the school environment requires:

- acknowledging stressors through self awareness, understanding stress triggers and personal stress symptoms
- identifying when stress levels are rising
- modifying behaviours to reduce the stress
- communicating concerns to others to seek support and gain assistance.

Seeking support

> 'The greatest hazard of all is isolation. New leaders need perspective on their new situations. One indispensable source of perspective is a network of advisors and counsellors who offer an appropriate mix of technical, political and personal help.'
>
> **Source: Ciampa & Watkins (2005, p. 274)**

Research indicates that having an experienced colleague to provide guidance on technical skills and strategic issues is highly beneficial. Securing a mentor or a coach will help you manage practical and emotional challenges. Formal and informal principals' or school leaders' networks and associations may also be a valuable source of advice and social support.

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![Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited]

New role, new demands

A school leader's guide

Contents

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.

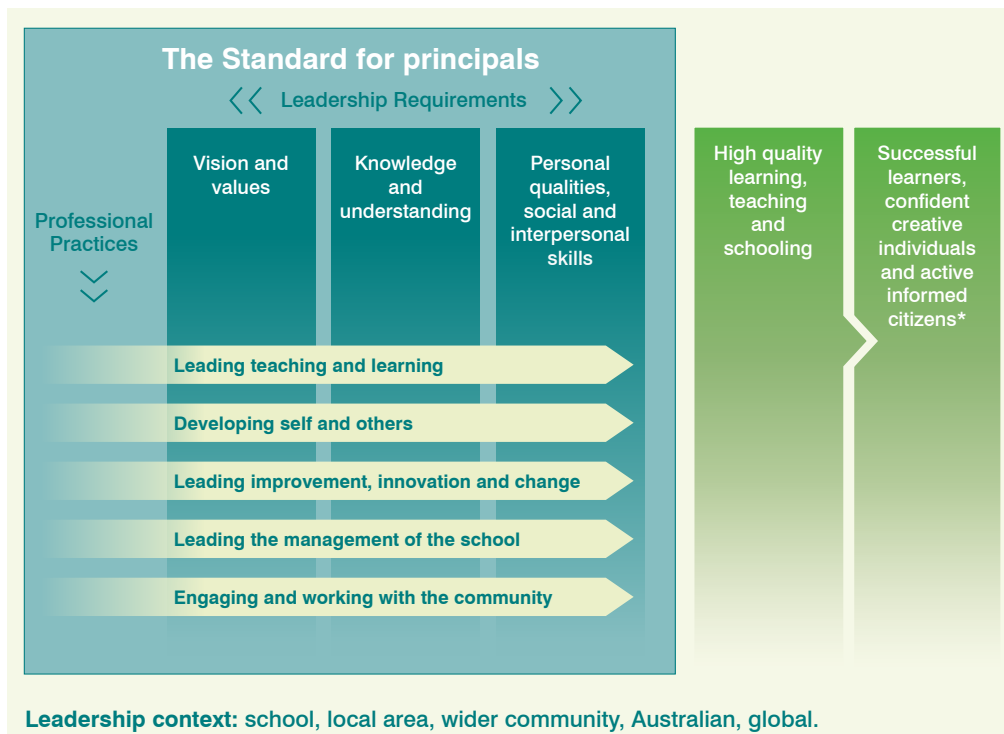This icon indicates a link to a resource.

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 demands

New role, new demands, one video in the series, focuses on elements in the Professional Practice of Leading the management of the school, in particular:

- understanding effective time management
- using strategies and techniques to enhance time management
- appropriately delegating tasks and ensuring accountabilities are met.

Managing time

Schools are busy, complex environments and the principal role reflects this. Within each of the five Professional Practices of the *Standard* (see page 1), there is a multitude of different activities. As new leaders settle into their role they face a variety of challenges: an increasingly diverse set of tasks, the unpredictability of the day, role ambiguity and conflict.

Navigating these challenges requires good time management habits, but the unpredictably of schools means that these have to be tempered by flexibility. Time management refers to a systematic approach for dealing with daily tasks and issues to effectively accomplish one's goals. Decisions on how to allocate time between priorities are important for effective leadership and enhancing school outcomes.

'Our ability to plan, enlist the help of others, and achieve a vision is directly related to our ability to efficiently organize our environments and effectively use time.'

Source: Buck (2013, p. 2)

The time management skills discussed in this paper include setting achievable goals, identifying priorities for action, auditing time, developing an effective time management regime and monitoring progress. These skills can increase effectiveness and boost job performance, and new school leaders can learn them through deliberate effort, practice and continual development. Time management skills are also important at a whole school level, as they impact student achievement, staff and parent assessment of the school and staff satisfaction.

The *New role, new demands* framework overleaf outlines an approach to effective time management:

- The **grey outer ring** illustrates the diversity of stakeholders and the broad context in which a school leader must operate.
- The **light green middle ring** indicates that managing energy and maintaining wellbeing can act as a buffer by increasing capacity and resilience.
- The **dark green inner circle** outlines the four steps a leader can take to support effective time management.

Leadership scenarios
New role, new demands

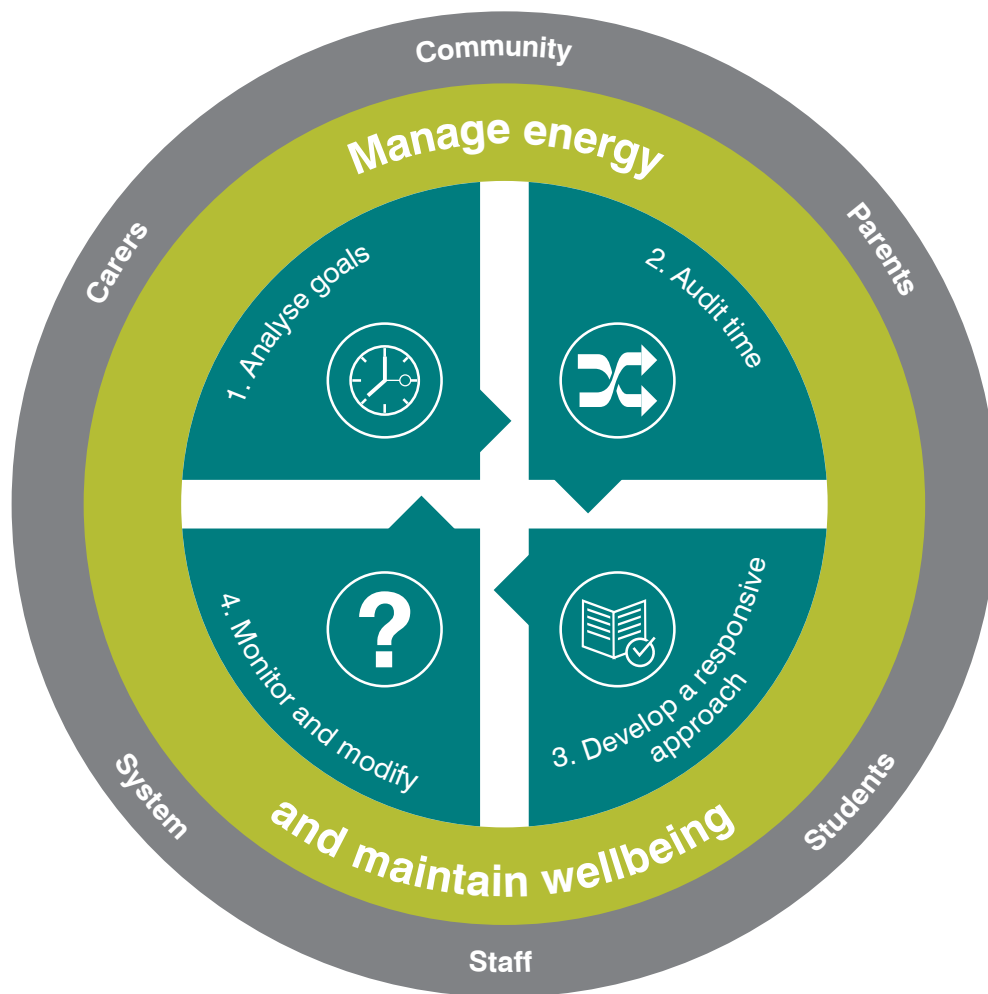*A framework for effective time management*

Figure 2: New role, new demands framework

Time management and wellbeing

Studies have found school principals have higher anxiety and/or depression and lower overall mental health compared to the general Australian population. Significant workloads and the need to constantly manage a wide range of issues can lead to feeling stressed, isolated, frustrated and eventually burnt out.

Effective time management practices are one mechanism that can contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction and energy. The more control we feel we have in a situation, the less stress we experience. Managing time and becoming more confident about your capacity to complete priority tasks is a critical element in taking control and managing stress. Even a modest investment in time management can make a real difference to job outcomes and stress levels.

Taking care of one's physical wellbeing and emotional health has significant personal and organisational benefits. These include:

- improved physical and mental wellbeing and resilience

- increased energy and vitality

- increased concentration and productivity

- improved mood

- improved enjoyment and engagement at work

- reduced burnout.

Research also indicates healthy leaders are perceived to be more capable and engaged, rating higher on various leadership indices.
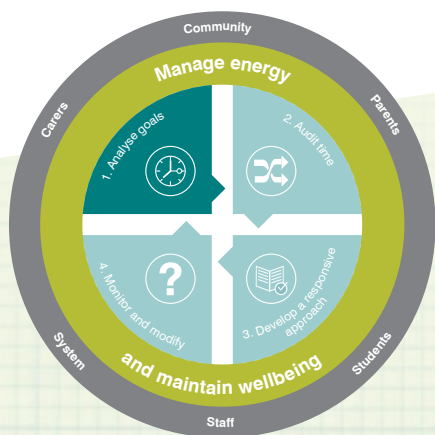
Step 1

Analyse goals

Setting goals and working systematically towards them is key to maintaining effective daily time management routines.

Goal setting

A school leader has to determine specific goals to focus on. The big goals will improve student outcomes, improve teaching quality and build capability within the school. Setting these goals requires understanding the bigger picture of what is needed in the school.

Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) suggests one of these habits is 'beginning with the end in mind'. Covey recommends people take the time to stop, reflect and think about what really matters and why. He emphasises that this process also depends on clarifying core values and beliefs.

Having clear goals can provide new leaders with direction for how best to focus their time. Yet schools are unpredictable and both urgent and important tasks constantly compete for attention. Urgent tasks need to be completed to manage the school, but the principal's time should be preferentially directed to activity that progresses the big picture goals.

> 'The principal of the future has to be much more attuned to the big picture, and much more sophisticated at conceptual thinking, and transforming the organization through people and teams.'
>
> **Source: Fullan (2002, p. 3)**

Identifying 'goal achieving' activities

After setting goals, it is important that professional judgement determines the issues that require attention and a quick response. This involves thinking about how daily activities will contribute towards achieving the big picture goals.

The important activities are those that contribute directly to these goals. If a school leader understands which activities are most important, it is easier to say 'no' to activities that are less directly linked to achieving the big picture goals. If your current goal is, for example, to bring the school budget into balance, you might focus on activities like reviewing spending and revenue, identifying areas of possible savings, seeking potential grant funding and so on.

Identifying your goals, and being clear about the activities needed to achieve them, is a means of being systematic and strategic in the use of time. It is also a way of deciding what not to do, either by delegating to others or by saying 'no'.

> 'Put simply, the most important things are to know what to focus on and how you are going to get it done. I call this always knowing your MIT: the most important task.'
>
> **Source: Kruse (2016)**
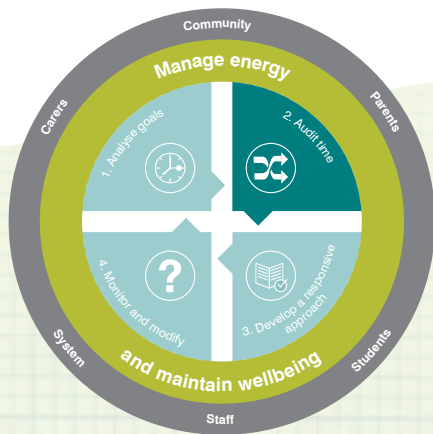
Step 2
Audit time

Establishing clear goals and planning to focus activity on those goals is not enough. There is often a discrepancy between the way a school leader actually spends their time and the way they *think* they spend their time. Some school leaders spend a significant amount of their time focusing on things that are time pressing, rather than important. Auditing time provides clarity around where and how time is really being spent and highlights where time management practices could change.

Checking how you spend your time

One way to understand time allocation is to use an activity log. This involves recording how much time is spent on each activity category. An activity log should be completed every day for five to ten consecutive days. This will provide sufficient data to determine patterns and trends. It is important the recorded data are honest and accurate to provide useful insight. Once the activity log is complete, it is possible to identify how much time was spent on each activity category. It can also show the part of the day when you are most productive, and patterns in the school day that suggest optimal timing for key activities.

'The last time I kept a log, I was surprised to learn that when I am in the office, I spend almost half my time on the telephone...'

Source: Biech (2008, p. 202)

Activity log templates

Finding the gaps

School leaders should then compare the results of the activity log to their goals. This helps to understand the time they spend on activities versus how these activities contribute to their personal and professional goals. If low value activities take up a significant proportion of time, this would be an area for change. The following are useful questions to ask:

• Am I spending time on activities that will accomplish my goals?

• Are low value activities taking up a lot of time?

• Which goals are not being completed?

• Where do I need to spend more time?

Prioritising effort

The nature of the role means that school leaders may find it difficult to accomplish all outstanding tasks each day. The most important tasks must be prioritised to ensure that a focus on urgent tasks does not prevent the completion of these more important activities. At the most basic level, it is important to recognise what is important and what is urgent:

- An important task is related to key goals.

- An urgent task is one that cannot easily be delayed.

By evaluating each task to determine its importance and urgency, it is possible to prioritise and schedule time accordingly:

a. Important and urgent tasks, such as dealing with a critical incident related to student wellbeing, should be prioritised and done quickly.

b. Important tasks that are not urgent, such as developing a policy related to pedagogy or the curriculum, should be scheduled but do not need to be done quickly.

c. Urgent tasks, such as completing paperwork related to an initiative that does not relate to key goals, should be carefully evaluated and delegated or rejected if possible.

d. Tasks that are neither urgent nor important, such as reading irrelevant material, should be recognised and avoided.

Stephen Covey's time management matrix can help to prioritise effort (Covey, 1989). However, it is still important to take account of the views of staff and other stakeholders in making these judgements. There will be times when an activity is more important to some stakeholders than it seems to you.

> 'How can a dedicated principal work really, really hard but fail to get significant gains in student achievement? The answer is obvious: by spending too much time on the wrong things and not enough on the right things.'
>
> **Source: Marshall (2008, p. 17)**
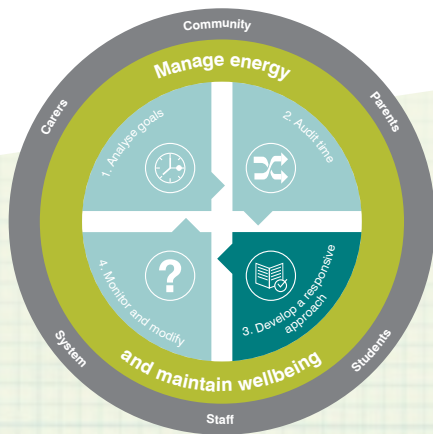
Step 3

Develop a responsive approach

Identifying goals and priorities helps you see what matters most, but does not encompass everything a leader has to do. A responsive approach to time management requires balancing important scheduled tasks with urgent, unexpected issues.

School leaders can address this issue by making changes to the way they work, such as choosing to adopt a to do list and using a flexible schedule. They can also make school wide changes to improve efficiency and promote best practice. This helps to support an effective school culture and information flow, helping the school to run more efficiently and freeing up time.

This section outlines responsive time management approaches for both individuals and the whole school. These approaches help to bring order and structure to demand management. However, some of them may be easier to adopt than others depending on school context and personality. It is important to use personal judgement to guide action.

Making time management a habit

Establishing good time management habits will require conscious attention at first, particularly given the frequent interruptions and urgent requests that are typical in schools. Changing well established habits can take a long time.

The process starts with recognising poor time management routines: perhaps you constantly check your emails. You can examine why you do this and what the cues are that stimulate it: do you automatically check emails when you return to your desk? Then you need a way of changing the habit: you could decide that in future you will check emails three times a day. You might find that you slip back sometimes, but recognising the pattern and taking action are steps to establishing better habits.

> 'Once you understand that habits can change, you have the freedom and the responsibility to remake them.'
> **Source: Duhigg (2012, p. 271)**

Adopting an appropriate time management system

Time management strategies that align to an individual's personality and preferences are more likely to be adopted long term. Individuals differ in their preferences, so it may be helpful to experiment with time management systems and processes and identify what works best. Some common time management approaches are described below.

> 'Highly successful people *feel* the passage of time. They know the potential that every minute holds and know the cost of 'giving away' even a single minute.'
> **Source: Kruse (2015)**

Creating to do lists

A to do list is useful because it consolidates outstanding tasks in a single document. It reminds you of important activities and makes it easier to schedule and prioritise. David Allen (2003) asserts that capturing all outstanding short term and long term tasks in a single place reduces the mental effort required to remember the tasks. Tasks on the list can be grouped based on similar activities and arranged in the order in which they should be done.

Developing an adaptable schedule

After identifying and prioritising tasks on the to do list, create an adaptable schedule. This can be done weekly, and modified daily when necessary. A schedule helps to protect time from unwanted interruptions. Being realistic with time expectations is critical to prevent over committing time, which increases stress and reduces effectiveness.

Useful tips for effective scheduling (adapted from Grissom, Loeb & Mitani, 2015) include:

- starting by scheduling the most important and urgent tasks on the to do list
- scheduling time to complete essential administration tasks (e.g. emails and meetings)
- planning tasks around the 'rhythm of the day' (e.g. the need to be visible at the beginning and end of day)
- arranging tasks around annual school events that require significant time and attention across the year
- including contingency time to allow space for inevitable unplanned, urgent and important demands
- allocating the remaining time to tasks that support key goals
- staying flexible by re-evaluating schedules and tasks.

Activity scheduling templates

Focusing on one activity at a time

Psychological studies have found that multi-tasking actually decreases productivity. This is because most people cannot attend to multiple tasks simultaneously. Instead, a person actually switches quickly from one task to another, resulting in a loss of productivity and broken concentration. Scheduling workload to allow focus on one task at a time will maximise attention, concentration and impact.

Adding items into a calendar

A commonly used time management approach is to transfer the list of prioritised tasks directly into one's calendar, integrating tasks with planned day to day activities. This ensures that time is set aside to complete the identified activity, prevents other meetings from being booked in that time and also sets a limit for the amount of time that can be spent on the task.

Sharing your schedule and diary

School leaders can share their diary with the leadership team, business manager and administrative support. If others know that an important deadline is approaching that requires a significant amount of time, such as the submission of budget papers to the Board, they can provide support by not booking other events or meetings in the diary unless urgent. This helps to introduce gatekeepers, who can safeguard time to ensure the leader can focus on the upcoming deadline.

Using technology as a time management enabler

Effective use of technology can assist time management. At an individual level, technology can be used to help set up efficient and effective day to day operations. For example, a digital calendar can be used to consolidate appointments in a single place, set automatic reminders, colour code tasks according to priority and schedule time for specific activities. Online calendars assist responsible and collective scheduling of tasks as well as providing insight for staff about the pressures and availability of senior leaders. Technology can be used to keep parents and other stakeholders informed of events and activities (e.g. through a school website, blog or group email).

It is helpful to have a whole school policy about the use of technology including:

- reasonable response times (e.g. for emails)

- restrictions on when emails will and will not be sent (e.g. weekdays only)

- protocols of use (e.g. always check prior to adding an appointment to someone's diary).

This helps to manage expectations of colleagues and parents and reduces pressure on staff to respond within unrealistic timeframes.

Popular scheduling apps

Establishing policies and practices

Policies and practices can be created to support effective time management practices for the whole school. Staff, parents and students can be empowered to take action themselves if policies articulate how they should behave in different circumstances.

Understanding what policies already exist

Most schools will already have policies, standards or ways of working. A new leader can check what exists, what needs refreshing and what needs recommunicating. Many avoidable problems or queries arise because people are unsure of what they should do.

Communicating preferred ways of working

Expectations about preferred ways of working can be communicated to staff. They could include:

- establishing specific open door times when staff members can drop in for short conversations without an appointment

- encouraging staff, parents and students to make a formal appointment for longer, more detailed conversations

- making a habit of being visible at set times in the school day

- empowering teachers and other school leaders to be visible as well (this makes them more approachable for parents and students and they may be able to resolve most issues without needing to refer to the principal)

- running a regular parent forum to help identify any concerns early on.

Sharing the load: delegating and distributing leadership

A school leader does not have to do everything. Time management for a busy leader is enhanced when others in the school take on responsibility for tasks and activities. Delegating to others is efficient, builds capacity and increases engagement. Delegation of tasks can vary according to staff skills, experience, capacity and development needs. Where capacity is strong, then leadership can be distributed more widely. Where it is less well developed, it is still possible to delegate but a higher degree of supervision and coaching will be required.

'A manager should ask, "Could someone else do the job sufficiently well?" If so, then someone else should do it.'

Source: Aquila (1988, p. 38)

Delegation

Delegation involves assigning and entrusting responsibility to others. Although the benefits are clear, research suggests that school leaders do not always delegate as effectively as they could. Delegation enables energy to be focused on the most important tasks. It provides development opportunities for staff members by enabling them to participate in school decision making and problem solving. Delegation guidelines include:

a. building a leadership team whose skills complement and supplement those of the principal

b. delegating tasks where:

- others have the expertise to complete the task

- tasks can be better and more quickly completed by others

- the task provides a development opportunity for others.

c. giving clear instructions and boundaries by checking that requirements are clearly understood, identifying the outcome(s) and time frames and clarifying check in points

d. matching accountability with authority by providing the person delegated the task with the requisite authority and resources

e. holding the person delegated a task accountable for delivering the outcome on time and to the expected standards

f. monitoring, encouraging and supporting by providing feedback to acknowledge successes and areas for improvement along the way (if this is a person's first time completing a task, offer additional support and encouragement)

g. focusing on the results not the process (micro-management is not helpful when delegating and people need space to achieve the desired result in a way that works for them)

h. keeping track of delegated tasks and providing early feedback about progress

i. watching out for upward delegation as, although advice and support should be provided, it is better to build capacity through support and it is not helpful to personally take on a problem unless critical.

Many schools in Australia are small, which can create significant challenges in delegating: there may be minimal support available, and some principals will have full teaching responsibilities. In this situation, school leaders may call on community resources and make links with neighbouring schools and regional services. Schools in rural and remote communities can share materials and resources and even explore the possibility of joint appointments (e.g. an assistant principal or business manager role).

Distributed leadership

When leadership is distributed, responsibility is allocated across the school. This emphasises delegation, collective responsibility and shared authority. It creates a positive cycle of capacity building and helps to clarify accountabilities, develop leadership capabilities and create a climate of trust. Distributed leadership occurs when several teachers are selected to lead decision making on a particular area in which they have expertise, or where all teachers are given responsibility to support the achievement of a particular outcome for students. Distributed leadership shifts the role of principal from a focus on decision making to a focus on building the capability of others.

Distributed leadership has received increased attention and support in recent educational literature and research and has been linked to higher student achievement outcomes. However, before choosing to encourage distributed leadership, it is important to gain an accurate understanding of staff capability and capacity. If capability is low, it may be wise to delay or stage implementation: skills training and capability development may be needed before leadership responsibility can be distributed.

Setting boundaries around personal time

There are many tasks, stakeholders and requirements pulling on a principal's time. Unless boundaries are established and enforced around personal time, it is easy for work hours to extend. Principals may then find themselves without a reasonable amount of personal time. To combat this it is important to be clear and specific about boundaries and hold oneself and others to account for respecting these boundaries. The introduction of policies and procedures related to down time for all staff can assist with this process.
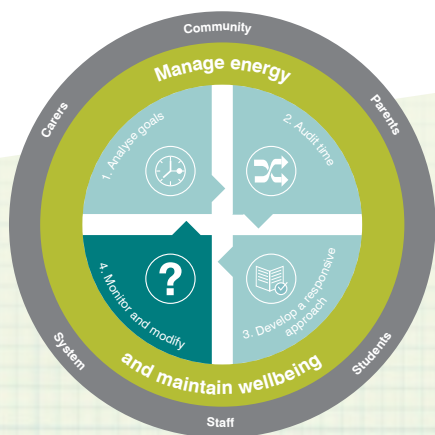
Step 4
Monitor and modify

Time management requires continuous discipline to ensure the right amount of time is allocated to the right activities. Monitoring progress provides a feedback loop that shows you:

- how effective your time management practices are
- the extent of time you invest in value adding activities
- obstacles or distractions that interfere with success.

Remaining adaptive

It is easy to become absorbed in day to day operations and lose sight of school and system priorities. An adaptive leader is willing to make changes to their time management practice where required. They try different approaches to ensure their efforts are aligned to their personal, professional and school goals.

> 'Managing your time is much more than making a to do list and learning to say no. It's a skill ... that requires self assessment, planning, and continuous discipline and improvement.'
>
> **Source: Managing time: Expert Solutions to Everyday Challenges (2006, p. 5)**

Managing priorities

Engaging in professional development

Professional learning is an important part of preparing for a new role, and it applies to time management as much as to other areas. It should include structured and unstructured learning activities to increase:

- capability (e.g. increasing proficiency to use technology to support time management activities)
- capacity (e.g. making time management a habit which frees up time for other goal related activities).

> 'New learning must become a habit, a routine of living.'
>
> **Source: Sorensom & Goldsmith (2016, p166)**

Selecting a mentor and meeting regularly

Leaders also need support in improving their time management effectiveness. Practice-focused mentoring is a strong professional relationship that attends to the professional development of school leaders through:

- ongoing conversations
- evidence about and self evaluation of practice
- goal setting aligned to the *Standard*
- technical and emotional support.

> 'Characteristics of an effective mentor include professional principal experience, ability to provide effective feedback, good listening skills and a non judgemental attitude.'
>
> **Source: Barnett (2001)**

Practice-focused mentoring is an integral part of a school leader's professional development and an important support mechanism for leaders learning to adapt to the new range of challenges and demands on their time. Although identifying the right mentor to share experiences and test ideas with may take some effort, the potential benefits are significant and worth the investment.

Beyond mentoring, school leaders should also build strong relationships and support networks. This means having a confidante or group of people to discuss issues with at school as well as support networks outside of school. Supportive and positive relationships are associated with positive psychological wellbeing and reduced risk of burnout.

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New role,
new partnerships

A school leader's guide

Contents

This guide for school leaders has been produced in collaboration with 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.

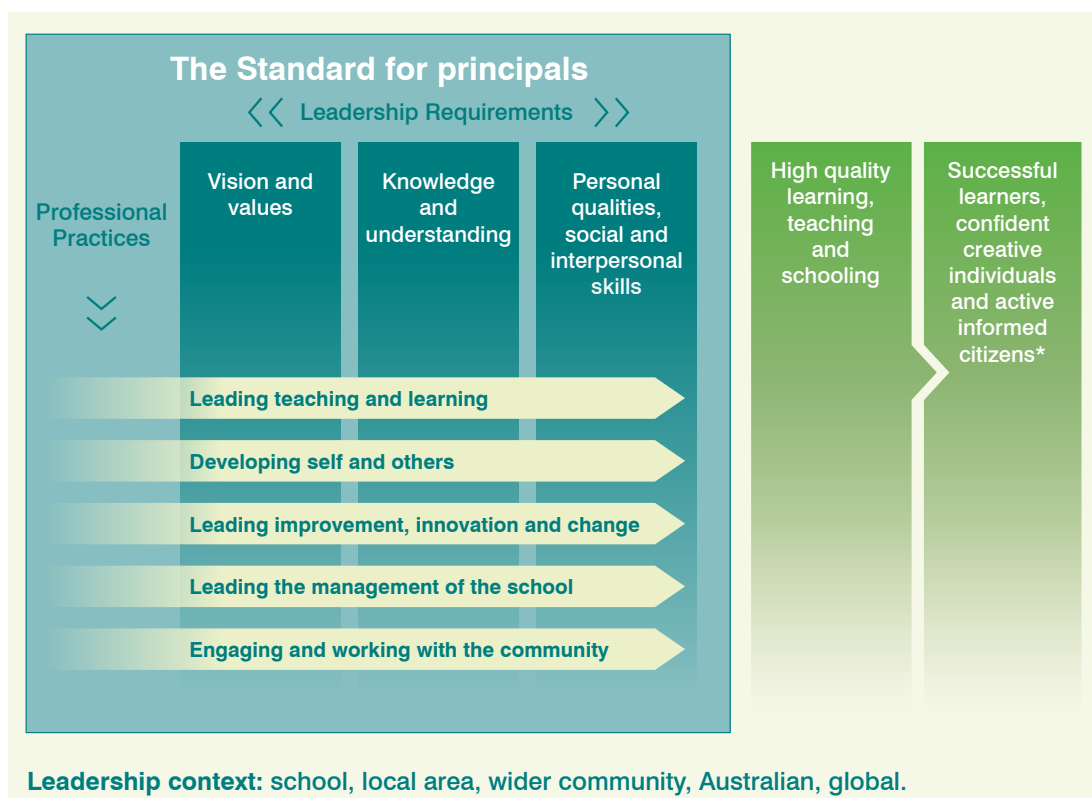This icon indicates a link to a resource

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 in understanding and dealing 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 the five areas of professional practice.

Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

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

New role, new partnerships

New role, new partnerships, focuses on building strong partnerships with families - in particular:

- understanding and working with families

- anticipating and responding positively to issues.

Importance of building strong relationships with families

Families – which include parents and carers – are important. Their expectations and aspirations affect student outcomes and attitudes towards learning.

Good family-school relationships mean children:

- do better academically, emotionally and socially

- attend school more regularly

- are better behaved.

Clear communication and engagement strategies with families underpinned by strong relationships with school leaders and staff make families more likely to support learning, school policies and practices, and more willing to cooperate if an issue arises. High trust relationships are built over time so new school leaders should invest time and effort in beginning this process as soon as possible. They should aim to achieve the right balance of visibility, authenticity and engagement for themselves and their staff.

Even with healthy relationships, issues will inevitably arise. However, stronger relationships will lead to better prevention and management of situations. For school leaders, managing difficult relationships or incidents can be time consuming and stressful. Identifying issues early and taking action can pre-empt many of them from escalating. This approach also requires the development of robust processes, for which school leaders are ultimately accountable.

The *New role, new partnerships* framework overleaf outlines three key steps to building strong relationships with families.

> 'Parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations they transmit to their children.'
>
> ———————
>
> Source: Hattie (2009, p. 70)

> 'Only when schools, students, families and communities share the burden equally do schools "perform" well. Current examples of collaborations between school and community in every part of the world attest to this fact.'
>
> ———————
>
> Source: Rothstadt, Csoti & Otero (2011, p. 136)

Leadership scenarios

New role, new partnerships

A framework for building strong relationships with families

2 **Anticipate and act:** Notice early signs and apply processes

1 **Engage early:** Understand and work with families

3 **Respond positively:** Work together to resolve issues

Figure 2: New role, new partnerships framework

Step 1

Engage early: understand and work with families

New school leaders are faced with the challenge of understanding and engaging with new families or with known families in a new role. This requires understanding families' different expectations of the level of engagement provided by schools and school leaders should adjust their approach to align with each families' needs.

Evidence suggests that the impact of family engagement is more significant in the early years of education. Therefore a strong focus on building relationships with families in the primary years will have a positive effect on student outcomes.

Building relationships at secondary school level can be more difficult but is no less important. Finding ways to maintain an open dialogue between staff and families without encroaching upon young people's blossoming independence, is crucial. This can include holding open sessions about common issues that cause concern, such as mental health, building resilience or peer relationships.

'Parent engagement is about leading with our ears, not with our mouths.'

Source: Ferlazzo (2011, p. 1)

Getting to know your families

School communities are diverse. New school leaders should gain a general understanding of the parent/carer community, as well as individual family needs and expectations. To do this, school leaders can use a range of approaches:

Draw on existing data on family satisfaction and complaints.

Build a school-level database of parent skills and talents.

Meet with school-based health care workers and community service providers.

Engage in frank conversations with parents and carers to understand key themes and recurring issues.

New principals are usually a source of significant curiosity, and sometimes anxiety, among the school and wider community. High visibility and good communication are always important, but in the early stages of a new leadership role they are essential. The most effective principals make sure every family feels known, even in the largest schools.

Balancing competing demands after appointment can be a challenge, so finding smart ways to engage with families is worthwhile. Existing communication structures and forums, such as newsletters, parent-teacher interviews, committee meetings and extracurricular activities can be used to get to know families. Whatever the forum, be visibly present and devote time to engage with as many parents and families as possible.

Informal engagement with families is equally important for school leaders. Successful leaders often make themselves available in entrance halls and at school gates at the beginning or end of the school day, and demonstrate support for their students at extracurricular events. This is a key method for gathering informal feedback and understanding different segments of the school community.

Despite a school's best efforts, there will always be some families who rarely participate in school life. It is important to learn about these families, understand why they are not participating, and take steps to connect in a way that works for them. Engaging with community organisations and leaders can help to break through some of the physical, emotional or cultural barriers that inhibit parent participation. Building a personal relationship with these families will pay dividends in the longer term. This might involve visiting them at home. It will most certainly involve making school events easy to access, affordable to engage in and welcoming to all.

'Principals of schools with more positive cultures placed high value on being visible to stakeholders throughout the day. Despite other demands on their time, these principals saw their visibility as a top priority ... by contrast, principals of schools with more negative culture … valued visibility, but saw it as something that could only occur after paperwork was completed.'

Source: Fiore (2000, p. 11)

The welcoming environment walk through

'Telling their stories' - school case studies in parental engagement

Establishing strong relationships with families

Families will look for the principal to be visible and available. However, it is not viable for the school leader to be visible and available at all times. Building strong relationships with families begins in the classroom, with regular dialogue about student progress, and is the responsibility of every member of staff.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) outline how teachers at all career stages are expected to engage parents/carers in the educative process (Focus area 3.7), report on student achievement (5.5) and engage with parents and carers (7.3).

Under 'engage with parents and carers' (7.3), the following expectations are set:

- Graduate: Understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers.

- Proficient: Establish and maintain respectful and collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing.

- Highly accomplished: Demonstrate responsiveness in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and wellbeing.

- Lead: Identify, initiate and build on opportunities that engage parents/carers in both the progress of their children's learning and in the educational priorities of the school.

The Standard outlines the expectation for principals to develop and maintain positive partnerships with students, families and carers. To do this, new school leaders should focus on:

- promoting parental and carer engagement as a key aspect of raising the achievement of all students

- modelling effective family engagement techniques

- sharing simple and effective techniques that staff can use to build relationships.

School staff should be equipped to look for opportunities to reach out personally and leverage informal opportunities to build relationships with families. Each staff member needs the knowledge and encouragement to:

- identify the needs and expectations of their students' families

- identify whether needs and expectations are being met

- help families understand what support the school has available.

Successful engagement with families requires confidence and capability that is different to the teaching or administrative elements of day-to-day roles. These interpersonal skills are an important part of staff development. School leaders should provide relevant professional learning, allocate time to engage and have clear expectations around family engagement.

Developing a family engagement strategy

A strategic and planned approach that considers families' different needs, abilities and desires for engagement is required. School leaders need to ensure that:

- communication with families is regular and easily accessible through the use of technology

- school norms or code of conduct are documented, understood and supported by a clear issues resolution process

- families can be engaged in school life at a level they feel comfortable with, ranging from school community social events, involvement in classroom activities to participation in committees and focus groups

- families can actively engage in student learning through information and reporting sessions, parent skill-building workshops and access to data/feedback on their child's achievement/progress

- consideration is given to inclusive practices that cater for the cultural needs of families, such as policies on racism and discrimination, celebrating diversity and translation/interpreting services

- a proactive, outreach approach is used to reach families who are less engaged.

School leaders should prioritise and optimise their involvement in engagement opportunities. To do this, they should identify the following:

- key points of engagement during the school year

- specific activities required at each time

- appropriate levels of engagement to meet school and families' needs and expectations.

A range of potential expectations and appropriate engagement approaches are listed below.

High interest, high engagement families: talk to families about how their engagement improves their child's outcomes and facilitates effective involvement.	**High interest, low engagement families:** keep informed with regular formal communication and informal conversations whenever possible.	**Families that are harder to reach:** reach out with informal interactions and show the school values their engagement in their child's education.

In developing an engagement strategy, it is important that school leaders don't stereotype families as, if they do, their approaches are unlikely to match family needs and expectations.

Parental engagement in learning and schooling – lessons from research

Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resources

AITSL's Illustrations of Practice – Leading parental engagement initiatives

Cultural consideration

The engagement process requires cultural sensitivity and safety. A culturally safe environment is one where people can feel confident and comfortable in their identity, culture and community. This requires teachers to have an awareness of their own and others' world view, knowledge of similarities and differences in cultural practices and skills for communication and interaction both within and across cultures.

Cultural competence can be enhanced by:

- developing a reconciliation action plan for the school

- understanding the diversity within the community

- communicating with consideration for all families, including those belonging to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups

- helping all students connect with other students with similar experiences

- facilitating family engagement by offering appropriate translation services

- celebrating diversity in the classroom

- taking positive action against racism and discrimination.

Step 2

Anticipate and act: notice early signs and apply processes

Early intervention is the best way to address family issues that may arise. School leaders and staff should be familiar with different families to notice changes in engagement and problem-solve potential issues before they escalate. Early intervention is essential to manage small issues and avoid unnecessary escalation or the need for formal conflict management processes.

Identifying issues early and taking action

There are a number of early warning signs that suggest an issue or complaint may arise. These will differ for each family and require different management strategies, but can include:

- a sudden increase or decrease in the level of involvement and engagement with the school

- children mentioning their family's frustration/unhappiness with their teacher or school processes

- an increase in aggressive (overt or passive) and/or avoidance behaviours

- out of character student attendance, behaviour, academic results or extracurricular outcomes.

If any of these warning signs arise, a staff member or the school leader should contact the family to identify whether there are any problems. If a problem is confirmed and shared, staff should work with parents/carers to take prompt action and deal with the issue before it escalates.

Developing robust processes to resolve issues

It is important to outline how families can raise issues and complaints, and how and when issues will be resolved. Therefore, having processes to handle and proactively manage complaints and issues is essential. School leaders, staff and families can work together to co-design policies and processes to guide how to respond effectively to various issues or complaints. Warm and open relationships between staff and families, combined with a solution-focused attitude, will usually lead to the early resolution of difficulties in most instances.

Regardless of the approach or level of staff involvement, family issues or complaints must be addressed promptly and within agreed timelines. While the length of time will vary according to the type of issue, aim for rapid resolution and communicate any delay to the family.

Schools should establish and maintain a system to record and monitor issues and complaints, and document their resolution. It is important to note all of the details relating to the issue, the actions taken and outcomes achieved. This will ensure that all these matters can inform school improvement and are available to refer back to if required in the future.

The issues management process must be reviewed as part of an ongoing focus on school improvement to ensure it develops over time and remains relevant.

Step 3

Respond positively: work together to resolve issues

Families can raise concerns or complaints about any aspect of a school's operations and, regardless of how well a school leader and staff engages with families, there will be instances where early intervention may not be enough to resolve the issue. In all circumstances, school leaders should expect staff to proactively manage issues and complaints at the right level, demonstrating awareness and understanding of when an issue needs to be escalated and managed by a more senior member of staff. Figure 3 outlines the different levels at which schools might choose to address different issues (depending on school size or other procedures, school leaders might manage all complaints).

Concerns and complaints relating to student learning and specific student incidents in their class or group	Concerns and complaints relating to a broader group of students	Concerns and complaints relating to staff members or complex student issues	Concerns and complaints relating to school policy, school mangement or complex staff member or student issues

As complexity and/or severity of issues increases, level of school leader involvement increases.

Figure 3: Continuum of issues and management level

One feature of good family engagement is an increased willingness from all parties to engage with and work through more serious and complex issues when they arise. In these circumstances, the following process can be used by schools to help to resolve the situation.

Understanding the issue

A positive experience during the first contact with the family will build the right foundation for resolution. Clearly understanding the issue from the family's perspective is critical to the success of the rest of the process. It is important to:

- **establish mutual respect:** understand and appreciate each other's perspective

- **gather all of the facts:** listen intently and focus on the situation, not the person

- **hear them out:** treat the family with respect and courtesy, but probe when needed

- **check understanding:** summarise what you heard to ensure you are on the same page

- **clarify next steps:** outline the next steps to resolve the issue.

At the end of the first contact with the family, ensure that the school and the family are 'on the same page' about the circumstances surrounding the issue and the next steps.

Understanding needs and desires

School leaders or staff dealing with the issue must:

- follow the school norms and code of conduct

- understand the needs and expectations of families

- have realistic expectations of the outcomes of the issue

- manage the family's expectations as part of the process.

Approaching an issue with a solution-focused mindset and a collaborative attitude is likely to bring about a best possible resolution of the issue. To achieve this, both parties may need to accommodate different perspectives and, at times, compromise to achieve workable solutions. Such an approach should minimise a competitive and hostile process, where issue resolution is not viable or agreed to by all parties.

Regardless of the approach, school leaders and staff should be honest and demonstrate humility when they deal with issues. They must also be able to acknowledge when the school is genuinely responsible for the cause of the issue. In this situation, the conversation should involve working together to improve the situation.

Generating, agreeing and implementing solutions

Once the issue is clearly understood, the school leader or member of staff should work with the family to develop and agree on a solution. It is helpful to prepare for the session, taking an objective and broad view of the possibilities. Consider similar situations and strategies that may have worked in the past to prompt thinking.

During the meeting, work with the family to come up with a range of potential solutions to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. It is very important not to judge ideas at this point and/or to evaluate their viability. Instead, consider the advantages and disadvantages of each solution. If the disadvantages of a solution outweigh the advantages, cross it off the list. Repeat this process until only practical solutions remain.

Once the list of potential solutions has been minimised to two or three, select the solution that will provide the best outcome for all involved. It may be decided that a combination of multiple solutions is implemented. Trial the solution by agreeing on:

- actions to be taken and accountabilities

- timing for implementation of actions

- next steps and review.

If the situation is being addressed by another member of staff, it is important the school leader is kept up to date with the issue and actions being taken.

Win/Win solutions – The role of collaboration in resolving problems

10 best strategies for dealing with difficult parents

Assessing whether the solution worked

After agreed actions have been trialled, conduct a meeting with the family to review whether the solution worked. Reflect on the questions below:

- What has worked well?

- What hasn't worked as well?

- What could be done differently to help solve the issue?

If the problem remains unresolved, consider and try a different solution. Involve others to help generate possible alternatives. It may not be possible to resolve all issues to the family's satisfaction, so a recalibration of expectations may be required. The school leader must be across significant or recurring issues so they can check in with the family if required.

Consider the effect on yourself

Remaining calm throughout the issue resolution process is important, particularly when directly engaging with families. The situation surrounding the issue may not be able to be controlled, but personal emotions can be. Remaining calm will help to progress the situation.

Education systems and sectors often provide guidance for dealing with family issues. One common approach to keeping yourself calm is the STOP approach:

- **Signal:** take note of your body's early warning signs of tension (such as shallow breathing).

- **Take:** control through breathing, take ten deep breaths and visualise release of tension.

- **Opposite:** a habitual response to tension is for our muscles to tighten and to negatively self-talk. Instead, do the opposite: breathe deeply and use positive self-talk.

- **Practice:** regular and timely practice can help. Try this before a meeting that might be difficult.

Keeping calm is particularly important when engaging with a family member who is angry or behaving aggressively. The reasons for a family's anger could be situation specific, informed by certain triggers or due to a personality trait. Regardless of the reason, there are a number of approaches school leaders can use to help resolve the situation. In general, these include finding common ground, bringing along staff to support and recognising when an issue requires escalation. Figure 4 indicates specific tools that school leaders and staff can use when interacting with angry or aggressive families.

Remain calm and in control: employ STOP					
Prioritise deflation	Let the family have their say	Validate family's emotions; understand their perspective	Speak in a soft, calm tone; show undivided attention	Avoid negative triggers and language	Reschedule action to give more time to find solution and diffuse situation

Figure 4: Approach to engaging in difficult situations

Source: Victorian Department of Education and Training (2009, pp. 1-2)

The AITSL school leader's guide *New role, new conversations* contains advice for carrying out difficult conversations. This includes guidance around collecting and considering information, clarifying the nature of the conversation, adopting the right mindset, creating a positive environment and effectively structuring the conversation.

Monitor and care for your own wellbeing

Managing difficult relationships or incidents can be time consuming and stressful. It can be easy to lose perspective, focus on the negative and overlook overall high levels of family satisfaction. Maintaining an open and balanced mindset will deliver better results. Seek a coach and mentor to work through more difficult times. This provides space to explore the issue and potential solutions, as well as providing personal encouragement and support.

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Australian Institute
for Teaching and
School Leadership
Limited

New role,
new conversations

A school leader's guide

Contents

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.

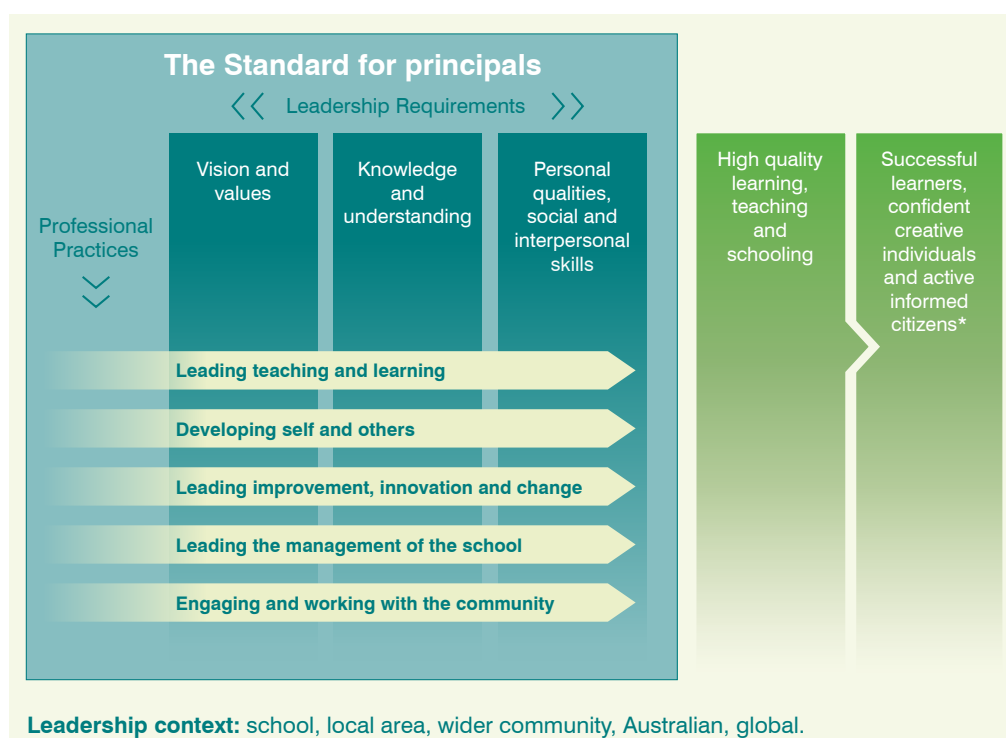This icon indicates a link to a resource.

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.

'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)

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.
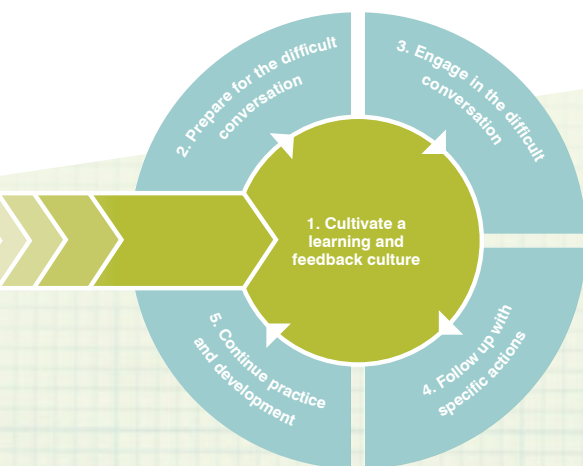
Leadership scenarios
New role, new conversations

A framework for managing difficult conversations

Figure 2: New role, new conversations framework

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.

Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework

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.

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.
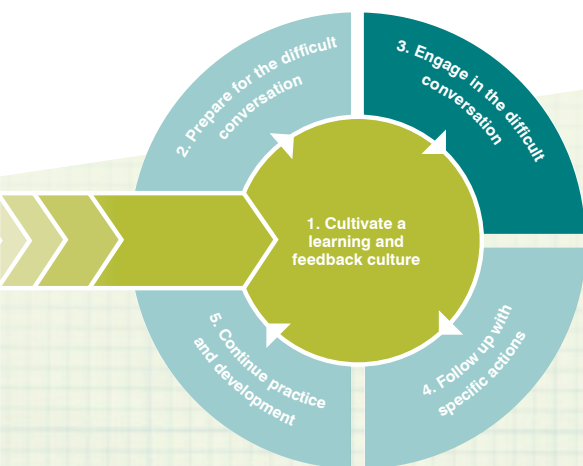
Step 3
Engage in the difficult conversation

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.

Managing difficult conversations

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.

'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)

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.

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.
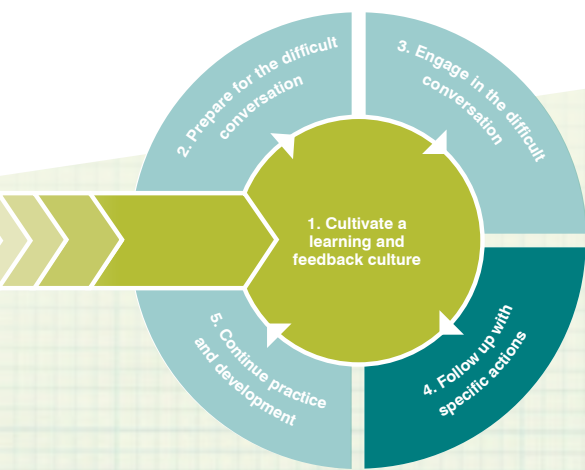
Step 4
Follow up with specific actions

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.
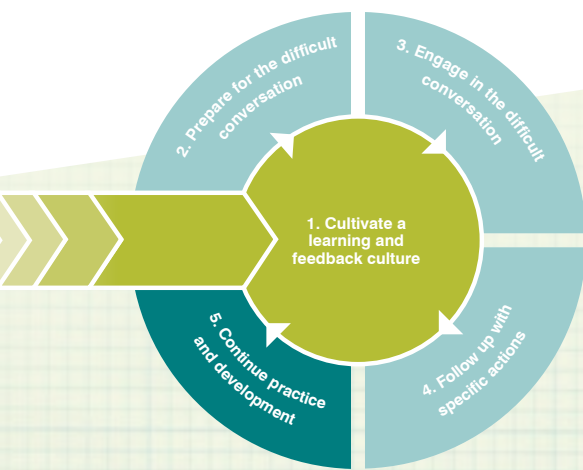
Step 5

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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