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Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited

Enabling leadership using dispositions in Standard 1

Elaborations and scenarios to guide your development of:

Focus Area: Interpersonal Courage within the Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures; and to Elders past and present.

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Focus Area: Interpersonal courage

Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to take risks to challenge school and team norms, cultures and practices that prevent improved student learning and wellbeing.

Elaboration of the definition

Leaders with a courageous disposition habitually overcome their fears, take risks, and make themselves vulnerable as they seek to improve teaching and learning. They make themselves vulnerable by exposing their ignorance and mistakes in circumstances where they cannot control others' reactions (Meyer, Le Fevre & Robinson, 2017).

Leaders' courage is seen in their willingness to risk adult relationships in the interest of their students, and to walk towards rather than away from meetings and conversations which they fear may bring conflict and discomfort. It is also seen in their willingness to risk failure when they tackle problems which others have avoided or given up on. In short, the courageous leader perceives risk, experiences fear and overcomes it in order to achieve a worthy goal (Goud, 2005).

In education, worthy goals are those that advance educational purposes in a manner consistent with the responsibilities of the particular leadership role. For middle leaders, committed to improving the attendance and achievement of indigenous students (the worthy goal), courage may be required in reaching out to their families about whom they know little (overcoming fear of being culturally inappropriate), and in challenging the negative stereotypes held by some of their teachers (risking adult relationships in the interest of students). For leaders of faculties or of senior year levels, courage may be needed in disclosing their personal disappointment at the latest National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results (being vulnerable) and in publicly challenging what they see as a teacher culture of low expectations (risking adult relationships in the interest of students).

Courage develops through a lifetime of conscious and unconscious learning opportunities. Although an educational leader may have been described in his childhood as having a timid personality, this personality trait does not preclude him from learning to be more courageous in pursuit of the responsibilities of his role.

Why is interpersonal courage important in education?

Educational leaders need courage in order to be effective in the numerous situations that are likely to evoke feelings of fear, risk, and vulnerability. Such contexts include asking for critical feedback, giving critical feedback, dealing with problems of teacher performance or behaviour, tackling problems where one feels inadequate or underprepared, and confronting dysfunctional cultures of gossip, deficit thinking or uncritical discussion. Courage is needed to encourage colleagues, especially those in less powerful positions than oneself, to give direct and honest feedback. When leaders take the risk of asking for feedback, making it safe to provide it and listening to such feedback, trust in the leader increases, because they have made themselves vulnerable and reduced the risk for teachers in giving honest feedback.

Leading improvement, which is arguably the most difficult part of a middle leader's role, also requires courage because ambitious improvement goals are unlikely to be met without challenging and

improving the features of classrooms, schools and wider systems that have prevented goal achievement (Robinson, 2018).

The price of timidity can be high. When courage is weak, formal teacher evaluations may not match those privately held by their leaders (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017); trust in leaders declines when they do not tackle longstanding issues of teacher behaviour and performance (Bryk & Schneider, 2003); money is wasted when the norms in networks and professional learning communities are to maintain "The Land of Nice" rather than to engage in rigorous collaborative critique and learning (City, Elmore, Fiarmen & Teitel, 2009).

What is it not?

Dispositions such as courage may be expressed in either virtuous or non-virtuous ways (Robinson, 2020). This distinction is important because without it we cannot distinguish between courageous acts that are foolhardy or unwise and those that are praiseworthy. For example, a leader who challenges a powerful parent who falsely accuses a child of bullying her daughter, may be courageous in overcoming her fear of the parent, but such courage is not virtuous if the leader speaks to the parent in a rude and disrespectful manner. This example shows that in the practical world of school leadership there is no such thing as courage "in the pure". In this example, the exercise of virtuous interpersonal courage requires being simultaneously respectful, honest without being rude, and open rather than closed-minded about the facts of the matter. In short, acts of virtuous courage enjoin wider aspects of the leader's character – the more virtuous the leader in the overall sense, the more likely their individual acts of courage will be virtuous. This means that while we can understand and discuss courage as a standalone concept, leaders cannot be courageous in the virtuous sense unless they learn how, in each context-specific situation, to integrate the requirement for courage with other relevant virtues.

Motivations

While dispositions like courage are manifest in behaviour, internal states such as motives, thoughts and feelings are critical aspects of a disposition. The courage of virtuous educational leaders is anchored in a passionate, internal commitment to the learning and wellbeing of students. These are the worthy goals that are pursued, not because of external reporting and accountability requirements, but because the leader cares deeply (their motivation) about ensuring all students have the required quality and quantity of learning opportunities in every lesson and activity.

Given the centrality of motives to the exercise of virtuous courage, reflection on and inquiry into leaders' thoughts, feelings, and motives as they attempt to act courageously is vital. While passionate commitment to the learning and wellbeing of students should be the primary driver of courageous behaviour, a host of other secondary motives could be relevant in different situations. For example, in pursuit of improved teaching and learning (primary motive) a middle leader may need to challenge aspects of the practice of an experienced and popular teacher. On such occasions, virtuous leaders will be motivated by such things as curiosity (they want to hear the teacher's viewpoint), and open-mindedness (their thoughts are not prejudging the situation).

Scenarios illustrating increasing levels of interpersonal courage

Scenario: Improving teamwork in the maths department

For some months now, Siliva, the Head of Math has been concerned about the quality of his departmental meetings. Some staff routinely arrive late, come unprepared, and contribute little when they are present. He has tried to be flexible and recognise the considerable workload involved in implementing the new state-wide curriculum, but feels that the meetings are nowhere near effective enough. After all, the intention was that teachers would plan collaboratively for the new curriculum and thus learn together and save time. He is disappointed that this has not eventuated in practice.

Proficient

Siliva decides to disclose his concerns to his deputy head of department, despite feeling anxious about how his concerns may reflect badly on his own leadership of the team (overcomes his fear and takes a risk in the interest of a worthy goal – more effective teamwork). His deputy shares his concerns about the team and suggests that the meetings could be more effective if Siliva circulated a more detailed agenda along with a clear statement about how people should prepare. He also suggested each meeting should conclude with a summary of the action items that needed to be done before the next meeting.

The agenda and action items certainly helped the focus and efficiency of the next two meetings, but Siliva still felt that the culture of the team was a far cry from the collaborative, mutually accountable and learning-focused culture he had hoped for. Talking to one or two individuals about his fears had not been sufficient, he needed to talk to the whole team about his concerns and see whether they agreed.

Accomplished

Siliva was nervous about talking with the whole team, so he planned carefully, even rehearsing how to be upfront about his perceptions without blaming his colleagues. The meeting went well. Everyone agreed that departmental meetings could be better and that they had not made as much progress planning for the new curriculum as they should have. Colleagues attributed the difficulty to the fact that people were tired, and to the considerable workload involved in planning for the rollout of the new curriculum next term, including the need to complete the online professional learning. Siliva had agreed to create a template that everyone could use to collaboratively plan the first unit of work, and to ask the senior leadership team for more dedicated meeting time.

While Siliva was grateful that the team's effectiveness was now discussable, and that some helpful suggestions had been made, he felt that the problem was due to more than tiredness and tight implementation deadlines. He believed that some team members did not want to collaborate with others, preferring to plan their own lessons and develop their own resources. He also felt they relied too much on his leadership when he wanted them to all take responsibility for supporting and challenging each other to do a good job. Why did they come to him to complain rather than first talking directly to the person they were unhappy with?

Expert

With some progress made, Siliva became more confident in his ability to lead a deeper conversation about how the team was working together. He told the team that while he agreed that tiredness and heavy workload were contributing to limited progress in planning for the new curriculum, he believed that there were other contributors that were harder to talk about. He illustrated his views with examples he had observed of teachers who appeared reluctant to collaborate, and of the requests he had from teachers who did not want to work with particular colleagues. He was careful to check the

accuracy of his observations and inferences about how people felt, and not to blame colleagues for their views. His courage in disclosing these possibilities and his request for frank feedback built sufficient trust to enable his teachers to talk about why they were not always keen to collaborate and about why they looked to him as a leader to solve their problems rather than taking more responsibility themselves.

Siliva summarised what he had heard and suggested that, instead of assuming that teachers would value collaboration and be able to do it well, they should identify the conditions which would make it worthwhile. It didn't take long for the team to identify those conditions (efficiency; open recognition of differences in relevant expertise; clear agendas, preparation and task planning and mutual accountability for carrying out team agreements). Saliva knew it would take much longer for the team to learn how to meet these conditions, but he was pleased that teachers said they now felt more committed to working together and accepted that they had a shared responsibility for making the team work more effectively – starting with collaborative planning of the new curriculum.

Discussion Starters

1. Do you consider yourself a courageous leader? What makes you think so? Do others think you are courageous?
2. When was a time you think you demonstrated courage? What happened as a consequence of your courage?
3. When was a time you think you did not demonstrate courage? What happened as a consequence of your lack of courage?
4. What conditions enabled you to be courageous in one situation and not the other?
5. What supports/ tools could help you be more courageous?

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Core Reading

Robinson, V. (2020). Educational leadership and virtuous courage. *Leading and Managing, 26*(2), 1-18.

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