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: Open-mindedness 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.

AITSL acknowledges Emeritus Professor Viviane Robinson for her significant contribution to the development of *Leading through Standard 1: Elaborations and scenarios that define practice*. Emeritus Professor Robinson was a member of the Australian Professional Standard for Middle Leaders Expert Panel, which supported the development of the Middle Leader Standards. This work draws on seminal international research in educational leadership.



Please cite this publication as: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2026, *Leading through Standards 1: Elaborations and scenarios that define practice,* AITSL, Melbourne.

ISBN: 978-1-925192-97-1

First published 2026



AITSL was formed to provide national leadership for the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership with funding provided by the Australian Government.

# Focus Area: Open-mindedness

## Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to lead with an open-minded and curious disposition. Being consistently willing to examine and revise their own beliefs by listening to differing points of view from students, colleagues, principal and other senior leaders and the school community, and use evidence to check and modify their own beliefs.

### Elaboration of the definition

Leaders with an open-minded disposition are reliably willing to critically examine and revise their beliefs. Their reconsideration of their beliefs is "not a matter of mere perfunctory listening to contrary opinions but a genuine readiness to revise or even abandon one's views in light of new objections or counter evidence" (Spiegel, 2012, p. 8). In short, open-minded leaders ask themselves "Ought I to hold the beliefs that I hold?" (Sockett, 2012). Open-minded leaders are truth seekers rather than truth claimers because they treat their beliefs as fallible rather than as taken for granted truths (Robinson, 2020). They are committed to testing and checking the accuracy of their claims and the quality of their reasoning (Argyris, 1976). The open-minded leader not only models such a stance but aspires to create a team or school culture in which everyone is concerned with checking and improving the quality of the thinking that informs their practice.

Being open-minded can be very difficult because our mode of reasoning is typically fast and automatic. We take cognitive shortcuts by imposing well learned perceptual frameworks upon complex situations, and assuming their validity and relevance. While such cognitive shortcuts increase the speed and efficiency of decision making, they get leaders into trouble if they cannot recognise when they need to switch from their typically fast, automatic mode of thinking to a more deliberate mode (Kahneman, 2011). A more deliberate mode is needed when embracing diversity and disagreement, when there is a lot at stake, and when circumstances may have changed. Open-minded leaders are very skilled at sensing when they need to make this switch.

## Why is open-mindedness important in education?

Educational leaders are powerful because their thinking impacts the lives and learning of hundreds of students and colleagues. For example, resources may be wasted, people may be unfairly treated, and students' learning stymied, because leaders hold mistaken beliefs and make bad decisions. Given that so much is at stake, there is a moral and professional obligation on leaders to be open-minded and cultivate flexible thinking in themselves and their colleagues.

There is a strong connection between diversity, inclusion, and open-mindedness. As communities become increasingly diverse, open-minded leaders recognise that the meanings, norms, and cultural practices that they bring to a situation may not be shared by others. They are alert to such diversity and quick to recognise that what they assume to be true and correct, may not be shared by others. Although they are open to all points of view, their inclusiveness does not mean they attempt to satisfy all equally, for that would violate their commitment to critical examination of differing viewpoints.

## What is it not?

Open-mindedness does not mean that the leader is uncritically open to experience. As Hare, (2003, p. 7) explains: "…open-mindedness, as Dewey famously put it, is not empty-mindedness (Dewey, 1966: 175). It is a form of critical receptiveness …, not mere receptiveness to any idea regardless of its merits. Cranks, who find their views rejected, are quick to claim that their critics are not open-minded, but open-mindedness requires that we examine the evidence seriously, not that we accept it." While leaders should listen carefully to the views of all relevant parties, open-mindedness does not require giving equal weight to all views. Rather, it is critical receptiveness that is required (Hare, 2003)

## Motivations

To overcome the numerous cognitive and social barriers to open-mindedness, a leader needs to be a truth seeker. Leaders who are truth seekers are strongly motivated by the need to gain and report accurate information, to be open to contrary evidence, and to explain what they believe and why. Such accuracy motivation (Hart et al., 2009) enables them to overcome the numerous cognitive and social barriers to open-mindedness. One such barrier is confirmation bias - we are hard wired to select and use information which confirms rather than challenges our existing beliefs (Kahneman, 2011). Leaders who are motivated more by the need to be accurate (truth seekers) than by the need to defend their point of view, (truth claimers) engage with diverse views so they can learn from them, rather than tolerate them or partition them into "your truth and my truth". Accuracy motivation is activated by reminders to consider a wide range of evidence, to evaluate arguments for and against a course of action, and to be mindful of the consequences of being wrong (Soll, Milkman, & Payne, 2015). Open-mindedness can be inhibited by severe time pressure, a high need for closure, low tolerance for uncertainty, and dislike of cognitive effort.

# Scenarios illustrating increasing levels of open-mindedness

**Scenario: Seating arrangements**

Lynley, a head of department in a co-educational college, had always seated her students at tables to foster collaboration and group discussion. Imagine her surprise when she watched a video of one of the most successful schools in the state and saw that the students were seated in rows, facing the teacher at the front of the class. She decided that she should lead a discussion about seating arrangements with her team. It was timely because she knew that some of the classroom furniture was due for replacement. Should the order be for tables or desks?

## Proficient

Lynley was open minded in that, even though the seating arrangements in the video were contrary to her team's practice, her first reaction was of surprise and curiosity rather than dismissive criticism. She began to reflect on why she and her team had chosen group seating and wondered why the school in the video had not. She decided to talk with her team about the video and reflect together about the beliefs that had led them to automatically assume that sitting in groups was better than sitting in rows. How valid were those beliefs? How would they find the answer?

## Accomplished

Lynley led the discussion about seating arrangements by describing her surprise at what she had seen in the video and inviting her colleagues' reaction. A couple of teachers were dismissive of the possibility that sitting in rows was beneficial for students – teachers who wanted such arrangements, they claimed, were all about keeping control and disciplining students. Others were more open to the possibility that it was a good idea and were curious about why the school in the video had chosen those arrangements. Lynley stressed the need to avoid speculation about the school's motives or about the impact sitting in rows had on students' engagement and learning. Those questions could be answered by talking directly and respectfully to the school in the video.

## Expert

There was pressure from some teachers to vote on the seating arrangements or to allow teachers to choose what they wanted in their own classrooms. Lynley argued against both those decision strategies because she wanted the decision to be made after a robust debate informed by research evidence and evidence drawn from their own classes and those in the video. What beliefs had led to the assumption that group seating was preferable? What beliefs had led leaders in the video school to seat their students in rows rather than in table groups? How valid were those beliefs? What research might help them? What could their own students tell them about the effect of table groups on their enjoyment of lessons and on their ability to focus and concentrate?

### Discussion Starters

1. Have you ever been proven wrong about a person, place or thing? What happened and what did you do on realising you were wrong?
2. Think of times you have changed your mind about the validity of some of your views. What enabled you to do that?
3. Under what conditions or emotional states do you find it hard to be open to views that differ from your own? Do you find it hard to feel vulnerable? Why do you think that is?

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## Core Reading

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[1] This paper has user-pay access only.

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AITSL is funded by the Australian Government