

# Enabling leadership using knowledge and skills in Standard 2

Elaborations and scenarios to guide your development of:

**Focus Area: Building relational trust  
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: Building relational trust

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

The ability to build and sustain a culture of trust in which teaching and learning improvement is shared, well supported and competently led.

### Elaboration of the definition

Relational trust can be defined as a type of relationship in which there is a willingness to accept risk and vulnerability because the other person is judged as being respectful, as having personal regard for others, as acting with integrity, and as competent in their role (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Leaders build trust by consistently demonstrating:

1. respect for others
2. personal regard for others
3. acting with integrity and
4. role-related competence

Respect is largely about asking genuine questions and being willing to listen, especially to views that differ from those of the leader. Genuine inquiry is “asking questions to which you do not already know the answer; of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person” (Schein, 2013, p. 21). Leaders demonstrate personal regard when they care about the personal and professional lives of their staff. For example, they know the career aspirations of their teachers and actively support their pursuit of professional goals.

Integrity involves such things as being honest and transparent, keeping one’s word, using one’s powers responsibly and acting in the interest of the whole rather than a favoured few.

Competent leaders increase trust because teachers have confidence that they will make good decisions and lead in a way that enables rather than hinders their efforts. Key to perceptions of competence is leaders’ behaviour in dealing with incompetence. Leaders who show courage, empathy, open-mindedness and who persevere in the resolution of competence issues are likely to be perceived as more competent than those who avoid or blunder in dealing with such issues.

The above four determinants of trust suggest that it is built through the skilful integration of factors that strengthen relationships (being respectful and having integrity) while progressing the tasks that are important to the achievement of organisational goals (role-related competence).

Trust is not something that must be established before tasks can be tackled - rather trust is built while doing the work with integrity and in respectful and competent ways. In many contexts, leaders struggle to integrate these requirements. For example, when honest critical feedback is required, leaders frequently affirm, reassure, and minimise or withhold their critical feedback. In short, they sacrifice the task of having an honest professional conversation about the quality of teaching, in the interest of protecting adult relationships (Sinnema et al., 2013). Building trust requires leaders to deal effectively with perceived breaches of trust, including perceived poor performance, disciplinary matters, and failure to keep agreements.

## Why is building relational trust important?

In education, there is compelling evidence that the level of trust between teachers and their leaders makes an important difference to the way they work together and to the social and academic progress of students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard et al., 2009). In schools with higher levels of trust, teachers experience a stronger sense of professional community and are more willing to innovate and take risks. In addition, students in high trust schools make more academic and social progress than students in otherwise similar low trust schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Trust is essential for productive teamwork and building a culture in which there is collective responsibility and accountability for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Lencioni, 2009). Without trust of their leaders, there is little chance that teachers will fully engage in the hard work of improvement.

## Scenarios illustrating increasing capability in building relational trust

### Scenario: Classroom management

For the third time in the last two weeks, Rosamunde had gone to Prakash, her team leader, to complain about the behaviour of her Year 7-8 class. She described how they called out, poked and goaded each other, and were generally disruptive. She wanted the boy she called the ringleader to be removed from her class and his parents spoken to. Prakash was aware of her difficulties with classroom management and had attempted to help by offering more professional development. But he had found it really difficult because Rosamunde was adamant that she shouldn't have to teach boys who didn't want to learn. The problem was theirs not hers. Prakash knew that he had to find the time to support Rosamunde more effectively. If he didn't, she would be in his office every second day.

### Proficient

Prakash thought that if he listened more carefully to Rosamunde, she might feel less defensive and begin to trust his offer of help. Perhaps it had been a mistake to immediately suggest that she do some professional learning. It had put the spotlight on her behaviour management skills and ignored her strong beliefs that she didn't need such help. In ten minutes of careful listening to Rosamunde, Prakash learned that in her previous teaching experience in Singapore she had never encountered children like these boys and, if she had, she would not have been expected to keep them in class. Prakash was genuinely grateful for what he had learned, but also acutely aware that Rosamunde's beliefs were not compatible with what was expected of teachers in her new Australian context. He signalled that when they next met, he wanted to discuss the difference between those expectations and what was expected of teachers in her current school.

### Accomplished

At the next meeting, Prakash invited Rosamunde to explain what she saw as the difference between the expectations of teachers in Singapore and Australia about how they managed student behaviour. He then suggested they figure out together what was triggering the boys' behaviour and how it could be improved. Rosamunde agreed that observations of the boys' behaviour and of her own responses to it might provide clues about what to do. She seemed happy that Prakash asked who she wanted as the observer and which time she preferred. Prakash was surprised and pleased that she now trusted him sufficiently to nominate him as the observer.

When they discussed the observations, Prakash was direct and clear about how Rosamunde's responses to the boys might be contributing to their continuing misbehaviour. He was genuine when he said that, with appropriate help, he thought Rosamunde could gain greater control, increase the

learning time for everyone and reduce her own stress. Most important of all, he directly checked with Rosamunde about whether she was now willing to learn some different behaviour management strategies. He was relieved when she said “Yes” because, if she had still insisted it wasn’t her responsibility, he would have had to explain the likely consequences of her not meeting the expectations of the role.

## Expert

While Prakash made considerable progress in one-to-one meetings with Rosamunde, he wanted her to access help across the team and even wider if needed. This was impossible while the work he was doing with Rosamunde remained private. He wanted a team culture where difficulties, learning, and expertise were shared, so he talked with Rosamunde about how this could happen. She confessed that she wanted to overcome her sense of shame about her classroom management difficulties. She thought she could do this by approaching those colleagues who Prakash thought could help her with specific classroom management routines, such as starting work, managing phone use, requesting help, and responding to the teacher. She was willing, however, to allow Prakash to tell the team that Rosamunde might approach them for help, and to discuss ways in which they could build trust as a team by sharing their difficulties and helping each other.

## Discussion Starters

1. What do the four determinants of trust suggest that middle leaders could do to build trust in their team?
2. What is your theory of how to build trust? To what extent is it challenged by the theory discussed here (Bryk & Schneider (2002)?

## References

Lencioni, P. (2009) The five dysfunctions of a team. Retrieved from <http://files.soundview.com.s3.amazonaws.com/sample-summary/5dys.pdf>

Schein, E. H. (2013). *Humble inquiry: The gentle art of asking instead of telling*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.


Sinnema, C. E. L., Le Fevre, D., Robinson, V. M. J., & Pope, D. (2013). When others' performance just isn't good enough: Educational leaders' framing of concerns in private and public. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 12*(4), 301-336.

## Core Reading

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 40

The logo for AITSL, featuring the lowercase letters 'aitsl' in a sans-serif font. The letters are colored with a gradient from light green to dark teal.

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A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of two overlapping triangles. One is a dark teal triangle pointing upwards from the left, and the other is a light green triangle pointing downwards from the right. They meet at a central point.

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