

Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders

STANDARD 2: ENABLING KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Focus Area: Self-reflection

*Elaborations, scenarios and analysis to guide
your development*



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 2: 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.

© 2026 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

Please cite this publication as: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2026, *Leading through Standards 2: Elaborations and scenarios that define practice*, AITSL, Melbourne.

ISBN: 978-1-7646544-0-1

First published 2026

AITSL owns the copyright in this publication.

Other than as permitted above, or by the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth), no part of this publication may be produced, stored, published, performed, communicated or adapted, regardless of the form or means (electronic, photocopying or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Address inquiries regarding copyright to:

AITSL, PO Box 299, Collins Street West, VIC 8007, Australia.

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: Self-reflection

Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to intentionally reflect on own biases, values and perspectives to gain greater insight about oneself as an individual and leader and to seek feedback to engage in a continuous cycle of growth and development.

Elaboration of the definition

Reflective leadership is the consistent practice of reflection, which involves conscious awareness of behaviours, situations and consequences with the goal of improving one's own and the team or organization's performance (Castelli, 2016). Done well, it can help leaders to clarify the values and behaviours that are important to them and to detect the extent to which they have lived up to those standards (Argyris, 1991). Reflection that is done well is purposeful – the leader knows what they are reflecting about and why. It is also based on accurate information. Because people's reflections are typically based on how they wish or intend to be in a given situation, rather than on how they actually were, honest feedback from others or behavioural evidence of their own leadership practice is usually needed for accurate and fruitful reflection. Self-reflection that promotes leadership learning and development requires an open-minded disposition so that cherished beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions are not treated as sacrosanct.

Unless they are very deliberate in protecting time, leaders rarely engage in self-reflection because of their busy and fast-paced work (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). Despite these time barriers, leaders can use existing team meetings and informal conversations to get feedback on their leadership and then reflect on the feedback at a suitable private time.

Why is self-reflection important?

Self-reflection is important for several reasons. First, even though middle leaders might not feel powerful, they make decisions that have considerable impact on their colleagues and their students. They make decisions about how to plan, teach and assess, and about how to nurture the wellbeing of students. Reflection before, during, and after making such decisions is likely to increase their quality by detecting mistaken assumptions, possible biases and the overlooked complexity of implementation.

Second, accurate reflection enables leaders to spot mismatches between how they intended and how they actually behaved. Since others are much more likely to detect such incongruence than leaders themselves, self-reflection must be supplemented by feedback from others or behavioural evidence of what actually took place (Argyris, 1991). Once behavioural mismatches are detected, leaders who are skilled in deep reflection, or who have good coaches, can uncover the thinking, emotional triggers, and motivations that led them to behave in ways that were contrary to their espousals. In this way they can access the drivers of their leadership actions and reflect on how to change them.

Third, self-reflection, especially when focused on positive examples, can strengthen leadership identity – that is, how they think of themselves in their leadership role (Lanaj, Foulk & Jennings, 2023). Regular reflection on “How was I as a leader today?” can increase confidence in and commitment to being a leader (Lanaj, Foulk & Jennings, 2023).

Scenarios illustrating increasing levels of self-reflection

Scenario: Reflecting on feedback

Iain, Dean of Year 7 at Cairncross College, had recently attended a course for aspiring senior leaders. As part of the course his colleagues had been asked to complete an anonymous survey about his leadership. He was somewhat shocked by the results and particularly frustrated by the abstract and anonymous nature of the feedback. What did it mean that he had difficulty “reading others’ feelings” and was “not always collaborative”? In his mind, good leaders checked rather than “read” others feelings and collaborated on some decisions but not on others. His coach had helped him through his annoyance and advised him to reflect on his colleagues’ perceptions and seek more informal feedback on specific aspects of his leadership. Perhaps they could give him some concrete examples which would make the survey feedback more useful.

Proficient	
Scenario	Analysis
Iain used the survey results to set goals for his professional development plan. In his mind, the most important one was about his interpersonal skills – particularly checking in with others so he got honest reactions rather than compliance. Since the survey data had indicated that one of his strengths was his clear expression of his own views, it seemed to him that he needed to add the skill of more frequent checking for others’ reactions. He wrote CHECK on a post-it note and took it with him to every meeting. For a while, his colleagues did not really speak up. When he thought about it, he realised he might need to tell them that he was trying to change his behaviour and that he needed their help. His openness certainly seemed to help, as they not only gave him feedback about his specific suggestions but contributed freely to the new wrap-up routine, where everyone briefly described how they had found the meeting.	<i>Iain’s self-reflection has a clear purpose – improving his interpersonal skills, beginning with how he checks for others’ reactions. He seeks accurate information by asking his team for feedback and discloses why he is seeking their help. His reflection is confined to his surface behaviours – he is yet to reflect on the motivations that explain his limited checking.</i>

Accomplished	
Scenario	Analysis
Iain was pleased with the progress he had made towards his goal, and well aware that there was more work to do. One of his most difficult challenges was Ron, a teacher who was routinely late in meeting administrative deadlines. He had given up talking with him about it and frequently completed the work himself. He realised that instead of dismissing further effort as a waste of time, he could reframe the situation as an opportunity to learn how to have challenging conversations. He returned to some resources from the course and realised that in preparing for the meeting he needed to reflect on his own motivations and speech rather than spend so much time privately figuring out what was right and wrong with Ron. He used a model conversation in one of the resources as a guide and scripted how he could open the conversation. The meeting with Ron went reasonably well with the teacher promising to get reports in on time. But Iain realised he should have asked more questions because he still did not know why the teacher was so tardy and whether he was aware of the way he was inconveniencing his colleagues.	<i>Iain deepens his reflection to understand more about why he is so frustrated with Ron. He realises he is part of the problem – he has given up and made it worse by doing some of Ron's work himself. His reframing of the problem as one he can learn how to resolve motivates him to develop some of the skills needed to make challenging conversations respectful and productive.</i>

Expert	
Scenario	Analysis
While Ron had met the deadline for reports, Iain was aware that he had more work to do to ensure that not only Ron, but all his team took administrative deadlines seriously. But he didn't want to talk with the team about it in his usual persuasive style. Instead, he wanted to learn what the team knew about the impact of missed deadlines on their colleagues. Maybe they saw some of the administrative requirements as less important than the senior leaders did. Once the team had had a frank, non-blaming discussion about these questions, then they could together work out a plan of action to ensure that important deadlines were met by everyone and that those that the team believed to be less important or even unnecessary were complied with until decisions could be made by all relevant leaders about whether changes were needed. Ron was delighted that several colleagues spontaneously expressed their appreciation for the way he now led their meetings. He decided to ask them if they would repeat the survey they had completed one year earlier, so he could gather evidence of his progress towards the professional development goal he had set to improve aspects of his interpersonal effectiveness.	<i>Iain's expertise is evident in his recognition that the issue of meeting administrative deadlines is not only an issue for Ron, but for the whole team. He leads a meeting where he inquires into and checks the importance team members give to meeting such deadlines and the reasons why they sometimes fail to do so. The result is a new set of team protocols about how to manage and meet key deadlines. Iain's reflections have not only led to growth in his own professional leadership but also to growth in the collective capability of the team.</i>

Discussion Starters

1. How much time do you spend reflecting on your own leadership practice?
2. If you would like more time, how do you think you could find it?
3. What steps do you take, or could you take, to ensure that your reflections are based on accurate evidence of your practice?

References

Ashford, S. J., & DeRue, D. S. (2012). Developing as a leader: The power of mindful engagement. *Organizational Dynamics*, 41(2): 146-154.

Castelli, P. A. (2016). Reflective leadership review: A framework for improving organisational performance. *The Journal of Management Development*, 35(2), 217– 236. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-08-2015-0112>

Lanaj, K., Foulk, T. A., & Jennings, R. E. (2023). Improving the lives of leaders: The beneficial effects of positive leader self-reflection. *Journal of Management*, 49(8), 2595–2628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221110205>

Core Reading

Argyris, C. (1991). Teaching smart people how to learn. *Harvard Business Review*, 69(3), 99-109. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn/ar/1>

A large decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consists of two overlapping triangles. The triangle on the left is a dark teal color, and the triangle on the right is a bright yellow-green color. They meet at a diagonal line that runs from the bottom left towards the top right.

aitsl.edu.au

Telephone: +61 3 9944 1200

Email: info@aitsl.edu.au

AITSL is funded by the Australian Government