



New role, new relationships

A school leader's guide



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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.



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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.

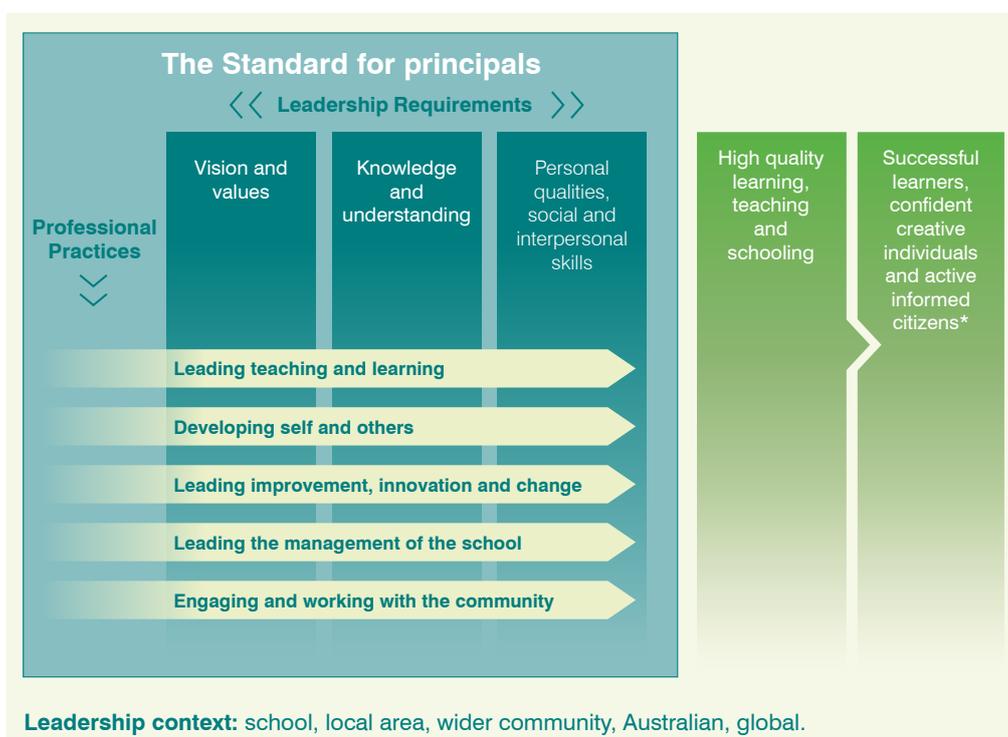


Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

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

New role, new 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



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 transitional 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.

'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)

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



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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