

# Leadership *for* Learning

A Resource for School and System Leaders

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**LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING** is a professional learning series for educators that provides information about current research- and evidence-based strategies aligned with the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF). Each issue addresses a current topic of interest to both formal and informal leaders and provides insights and advice in support of a culture of collaborative professionalism (as articulated in Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159, “Collaborative Professionalism”) and of the renewed vision for education set out in *Achieving Excellence*.

The first and second issues of *Leadership for Learning* focus on the transition to a formal leadership role. They respond in part to recommendations emerging from recent Ontario studies of principals and vice-principals, including the “Transition to the Role of Principal and Vice-Principal Study” (Armstrong, 2014), sponsored by the Institute for Education Leadership.

## The Aspiring Principal/ Vice-Principal

### As a teacher, what can I do now to prepare for a future in formal leadership?

There are many ways in which you can prepare for a smooth and successful transition to a formal leadership role. An important first step is to acknowledge that your path to education leadership has already started. It began when you became a teacher, since leadership is fundamental to the role of an educator. Another important step is to recognize that new formal leaders face unique challenges. Knowing what those challenges will be and building the capacity to deal with them are key to a successful transition. Thoughtful and strategic groundwork now will pay dividends when you embark on the role of vice-principal or principal.

This inaugural issue of *Leadership for Learning* focuses on five key strategies described in recent research or identified as helpful by new and experienced principals and vice-principals. Use the suggestions offered here as a springboard for reflection and dialogue with others. Reflect on what these five strategies mean to you, the extent to which they align with your beliefs and values, and what they inspire you to do in order to build your leadership practice in your particular circumstances and context.

## STRATEGY 1

### Act like a leader, think like a leader

Leadership is a way of being, not a job title. Remember, leadership can take place anywhere – in a classroom, a school, a district-based committee, a community group, a place of worship, or a family, to name just a few of the possible contexts. We are surrounded by leadership opportunities.

In the [Ontario Leadership Framework](#), leadership is defined as the “exercise of influence” (Leithwood, 2012). Leadership and learning expert Herminia Ibarra (2015) believes that, to become influential, it is not enough to increase self-awareness about our strengths and shortcomings through introspection and self-reflection. She challenges the traditional “think, then act” approach to becoming a leader and argues instead that we must *act* our way into a new mindset about leadership (see the graphic below).

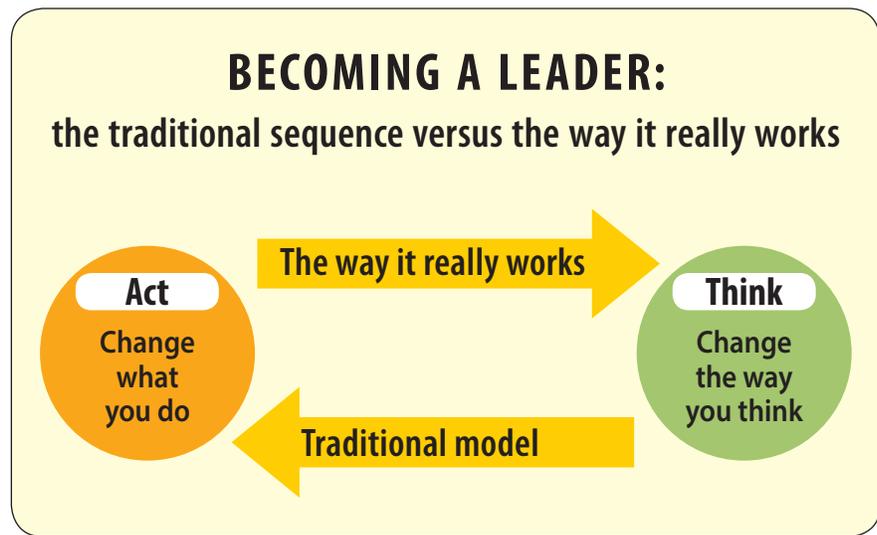
Why is this so? Ibarra’s research shows that we can increase self-knowledge only while engaged in the process of making changes. She argues that such engagement results in “outsight” – a fresh perspective that emerges from three critical sources:

1. new ways of doing our work,
2. new relationships, and
3. new ways of connecting and engaging with people.

Eastwood Public  
School’s motto:

**“Everyone  
is a learner.  
Everyone  
is a leader.”**

(James Cowper,  
Principal, Greater  
Essex County District  
School Board, 2015)



(Based on Ibarra, 2015, p. 3)

As our oversight grows, we begin to understand what kind of leader we'd like to become. By redefining how we do our work, building our personal network and finding different ways of interacting with others, we gain the experiences on which we can reflect and from which we learn. In other words, becoming a leader is about learning and growing *from the outside in*. This means "seizing the ropes" – stepping up to leadership and gaining the experiences that help us grow our leadership capacity.

When we look at everyday situations, we can ask ourselves what a leader would do in those situations, and act accordingly. The teacher's role in the classroom affords various opportunities to act as a leader. For example, teachers who want to practise leadership can:

- suggest thoughtful ideas, including ideas from new research, in planning meetings,
- bring together a diverse group of people to work towards a common learning goal about a problem of practice,
- introduce changes in the classroom environment to enhance teaching and learning conditions that support student achievement and well-being,
- provide ways to draw students into the conversation and help them see themselves in the learning – especially when it may not be clear from the curriculum or related activities – then share lessons learned with colleagues,
- become a mentor or coach to others from backgrounds different from their own as a way to learn with and from them about their perspectives on learning, teaching and leading,
- try out a new instructional strategy with an educator-partner, then join the partner in discussing their shared experience with others,
- help to resolve complex situations – such as an interdepartmental impasse – that may initially seem beyond their expertise,
- become a school "thought leader" by modelling continuous learning.

Teachers can also work with the principal and vice-principal to support the school's leadership team – for example, by:

- leading a school-wide project,
- offering to be "teacher-in-charge," and seeking the principal's advice about the role,

"How can I know who I am until I see what I do? How can I know what I value until I see where I walk?"

(Weick, 1995, p. 25)

*How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) reminds us that children's learning and development happen within the context of relationships among children, families, educators, and their environments. As a future formal leader, you will draw on the knowledge and experience you have gained through your work as a teacher, nurturing strong relationships with students, families, and other educators. Leading through relationship needs to be a foundational disposition for anyone who aspires to move into a principal or vice-principal role.

Include your principal and vice-principal as advisers in your leadership growth plans. Building the capacity that will enable you to make a successful transition to formal leadership depends on their support and encouragement.

Based on findings of the “Transition to the Role of Principal and Vice-Principal Study” (Armstrong, 2014)

“Friends provide a helping hand for that all-important but cognitively expensive emotional regulation tool, reappraisal. In the same way, having people you trust around you can also help bring about insights, by broadening thinking and helping you to see your own thinking.”

(Rock, 2009, p. 164)

- becoming an unofficial resource adviser or a mentor to new teachers,
- taking on an in-school role as a data coach who helps to ensure that student achievement data drives instruction.

One dimension of building leadership capacity, then, is to act as a leader and then reflect on and seek feedback on how you did. Often, you will “catch yourself” in the act of leading as you perform your work. Remember to ask yourself – and others – questions such as, “When did I genuinely lead the way?” or “When did I develop a vision and involve others in fulfilling it?” or “When did I challenge current processes or attitudes in a positive way?” or “When did I empower others to succeed?” or “What was I doing to make that happen?” or “What adjustments did I make when my actions didn’t get the results I hoped for?”

## STRATEGY 2

### Reach out – cultivate a personal network

The ability to build and sustain relationships is the bedrock of successful school leadership (e.g., Armstrong, 2014; Fiarman, 2015). Building and maintaining your own personal network of supportive relationships prior to moving into a formal leadership role is key to making a successful transition (Armstrong, 2014).

A personal network will go a long way towards helping you prepare for the realities of the role and the range of social, emotional, pedagogical and organizational issues that can arise. You can gain insights about the experiences of peers and leaders in your network by sharing scenarios and discussing problems of practice and lessons learned and considering alternative approaches with them. Research on “reference groups” such as networks supports the assertion that the fastest way to change yourself is to spend time with people who are already the way you want to be (Harris, 2009).

Strong networks don’t just happen – they need to be carefully constructed and developed. Most of us have at least the beginnings of a personal network, which we can expand by reaching

out to others and developing new relationships. You have a lot of discretion about who is in your personal network. Begin now to purposefully build a network of people who can provide ongoing advice, offer alternative points of view when issues need to be resolved, and act as a sounding board. Personal networks can include relationships with the people you feel closest to – friends, family and trusted advisers – and the people you meet through professional-development programs and courses, alumni groups, professional associations, and diverse communities. Remember to include those whose views may differ and who can challenge your perspectives. If possible, find a mentor or coach within your personal network to focus your thinking and hold you accountable for next steps.

A good personal network includes “kindred spirits” who share and challenge beliefs, attitudes and feelings. It can also widen your professional involvement and horizons outside of work and, in the best cases, offer developmental support such as coaching and mentoring. And when network members come and go over time, you have an opportunity to welcome new members who can add fresh perspectives and offer new challenges focused on your future rather than on your past.

Keep in mind that you must nurture these networks by ensuring that there is balance between the “give-and-take.” Many people will be happy to share their time and energy with you, but it is good practice to strive to give of yourself as well, to preserve a balance between giving and getting. One lasting benefit of achieving “reciprocity” will be strengthened relationships (Grant, 2013).

“Your network’s strategic advantage, and therefore, the extent to which it helps you step up to leadership, depends on three qualities:

- **Breadth:** Strong relationships with a diverse range of contacts
- **Connectivity:** The capacity to link or bridge across people and groups that wouldn’t otherwise connect
- **Dynamism:** A dynamic set of extended ties that evolves as you evolve.

I call these three qualities the BCDs of network advantage, or  $A = B + C + D$ .”

(Ibarra, 2015, p. 87)

“Let’s walk together, paddle together, navigate the river and share our journeys together.”

Elder Felicia Waboose

## STRATEGY 3

### View leadership as a personal learning journey, not as a destination

In *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, Michael Fullan identifies the “learning leader” [or “lead learner”] as one of three dimensions of the “new role” of principal/vice-principalship. Fullan defines the learning leader as “one who models learning, and also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis.”

(Fullan, 2014, p. 9)

In a culture of “collaborative professionalism” (see [PPM no. 159, “Collaborative Professionalism”](#)), we are all learners “working together, sharing knowledge, skills and experience to improve student achievement and [the] well-being of both students and staff.” Formal leaders who are new to a position of responsibility may be inclined to believe that “it’s my job to have the answers.” The fact is that learning to lead is a fluid, dynamic and evolving process. As learning organizations, schools need leaders who are comfortable with being, and who view themselves as, “lead learners” (Fullan, 2014).

A recent study of the transition to the role of the principal or vice-principal in Ontario (Armstrong, 2014) strongly suggests that seeking out and taking advantage of a wide range of professional learning opportunities – including formal learning programs, mentoring and job shadowing – is an important factor in making a successful transition. The study finds that job-embedded learning that includes “mastery experiences” is key to growing our self-efficacy as leaders (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experiences are those that help us develop the knowledge and skills we need to feel confident that we can address the complexity and overcome the challenges in the day-to-day leadership of schools.

Central to this professional development is maintaining a focus on “knowing oneself.” Acting “into” the role is important as it brings self-knowledge, not least in the sense of becoming aware of personal biases (see [Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools, 2014](#)). Distinguished leadership and management expert Peter Drucker (2005) maintains that it is our responsibility to manage ourselves at work and in life. To do this, he says, “You will need to cultivate a deep understanding of yourself – not only what your strengths and weaknesses are but also how you learn, how you work with others, what your values are, where you can make the greatest contribution.”

Developing and strengthening personal leadership resources (PLRs) is essential to effective leadership, according to *The Ontario Leadership Framework, with a Discussion of the Research Foundations* (Leithwood, 2012) – the “must-read” resource for gaining insight into leadership as “the exercise of influence.” The Ontario Leadership Framework is based on extensive research and explores the key dimensions of leadership practice. It identifies three categories of personal leadership resources (PLRs):

- cognitive resources, including problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, and systems thinking,
- social resources, including perceiving and managing emotions and acting in emotionally appropriate ways, and
- psychological resources, including optimism, self-efficacy, resilience and proactivity.

## STRATEGY 4

### Adopt a “no surprises” outlook about the role – observe, ask questions and learn

Virtually everyone in a new position of responsibility, across every type of organization, experiences the “imposter” syndrome – the feeling that we may have “talked our way” into a position that we are not qualified to hold (Fiarman, 2015; Bloom, 2004). It goes with the territory. While it would be naïve to think that we can arrive on Day One as instant leadership experts, fully prepared to handle every aspect of the job, we can certainly arrive with a clear picture of what the job is likely to entail. We can also selectively focus our current capacity building on areas that we know to be responsibilities in a formal leadership role.

In part, that means anticipating the managerial responsibilities we may need to undertake, in addition to our role as instructional leaders. A recent study of the work of principals in Ontario (Pollock, 2014) provides a good starting point in identifying the different tasks, duties and responsibilities common to formal school leaders – for example, student discipline; attendance; curriculum

Learn more about how to build and strengthen the Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) in the three-part series on the topic in *Ideas Into Action*.

Initial preparation for leadership should have a balanced focus on instructional knowledge and skills (related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment – the focus of “instructional leadership”) and on the “knowledge and skill required to enact those operational functions necessary to the development of a supportive organizational infrastructure.” Good background training in executing operational functions efficiently, and with a “learning imperative mindset,” make the beginning principal’s workload more manageable.

(Adapted from Leithwood & Azah, 2014, p. 13)

“The demographic and contextual diversity in Ontario schools, together with the province’s commitment to high levels of student achievement and well-being, have heightened the importance of effective leadership in schools and districts led by leaders who support diverse student needs by providing caring, safe, respectful and engaging learning environments.”

(Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 7)

and instructional leadership; classroom walk-throughs; internal school management; leadership professional development; parent engagement; building maintenance; personnel; occupational health and safety.

Leithwood and Azah (2014), who examined the work of Ontario principals and vice-principals, found that the ability to foster “a collaborative approach to school improvement” based on building “the capacities needed by staff to achieve improvement goals” is another key to success in formal leadership roles in both elementary and secondary contexts. Other “priority growth areas” that support successful transitions to formal leadership are “developing knowledge of the cultural and political dynamics of the school and the district” and “working with diverse individuals and communities” (Armstrong, 2014).

Prospective leaders can use these insights as a practical roadmap to the kinds of experiences and the kinds of formal and informal professional learning opportunities they might pursue prior to stepping into the role. These studies are of value for aspiring leaders because they illustrate not only that the role of principals and vice-principals is complex and demanding but also that it is viewed as a “satisfying and fulfilling one ... it is a rewarding job” (Pollock, 2014).

## STRATEGY 5

### Remember that taking care of *you* is a first priority

“Leaders-as-learners” (Fiarman, 2015) have a responsibility to take care of themselves in order to provide the support they must give others. When your well-being suffers, your leadership inevitably suffers. And when your leadership suffers, your entire organization – including staff, students and the community – feels the impact. It is not an overstatement to say that taking care of yourself is your first priority as a leader. Everything else follows.

People who gravitate towards positional leadership tend to be altruistic. Although concern for the welfare of others is a positive character trait, altruism can pose challenges for personal well-being. Those who are compassionate and giving may sometimes have difficulty recognizing – and taking care of – their own needs, especially when faced with the responsibilities of a demanding new position. Now is a good time to assess how well you are investing in your own well-being.

To this end, David Rock and Daniel Siegel propose the “**Healthy Mind Platter**” (2011). They say it can provide us with the physical and mental well-being necessary to establish and maintain relationships with family, friends and colleagues and to efficiently complete tasks and meet responsibilities in our work, in our communities and in our personal lives. The platter includes the following seven essential mental activities:

**Focus Time:** When we closely focus on tasks in a goal-oriented way, we take on challenges that make deep connections in the brain.

**Play Time:** When we allow ourselves to be spontaneous or creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, we help make new connections in the brain.

**Connecting Time:** When we connect with other people, ideally in person, and when we take time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, we activate and reinforce the brain’s relational circuitry.

“Very few highly resilient people are strong in and by themselves. You need support.”

(Southwick & Charney, 2012, p. 199)

**Physical Time:** When we move our bodies, aerobically if medically possible, we strengthen the brain in many ways.

**Time In:** When we quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, we help to better integrate the brain.

**Down Time:** When we are non-focused, without any specific goal, and let our mind wander or simply relax, we help the brain recharge.

**Sleep Time:** When we give the brain the rest it needs, we consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day.

(Adapted from Rock & Siegel, 2011)



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Rock and Siegel point out that there is no specific recipe for a healthy mind, because every individual is different, and our needs change over time too. What is important is to develop an awareness of the full spectrum of essential mental activities: “Just like with essential nutrients, make sure that at least every day we are nudging the right ingredients into our mental diet, even for just a little time.”

Ontario principals and vice-principals who are in their first year in the role add to this advice:

- Pay attention to key priorities while also anticipating time for the urgent and unpredictable.
- Although the advice to “grow a thick skin” may seem fruitless, we actually can and should learn to avoid taking things personally when dealing with conflict.
- The work is never finished – learn to set realistic, bite-sized goals and remember to set aside time to recognize and celebrate your accomplishments.

Ultimately, you lead from inside – from who you are as a person. Experienced leaders agree that nurturing that person is key to success in any leadership role.

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