Fact sheet 7
Disposition: Open Mindedness

Excellent leaders with an open-minded disposition are willing to examine and revise their beliefs, by listening to differing points of view and routinely using evidence to check their beliefs about what is happening in their team, school and community. They treat their own beliefs as fallible, and their reasoning as potentially flawed. Their stance is one of intellectual humility – of truth-seeking rather than truth-claiming.[1]

This disposition is important because leaders' decisions have considerable ethical and practical consequences for the staff and students involved.

Open-mindedness does not require everything to be negotiable at any given time. Excellent leaders are obliged to uphold regulations, policies and Codes of Conduct.

Excellent leaders also have obligations to uphold collective decisions and to challenge those who undermine teamwork by ignoring such decisions.

At the same time, they are open-minded in the sense that they listen to criticism of such decisions and accept the possibility that revision may be needed in future.

Exploring together

Explore the scenarios below. Discuss together how open mindedness is represented in these scenarios. What would be the outcome if the disposition of was not activated?

A team leader addresses lateness

Leader: I wanted to talk with you about your lateness to our 3.15 pm team meetings and check in with you?

Colleague: What do you mean? When was I late?

Leader: Well, if I recall correctly, you arrived half an hour late for our meeting last week and five to ten minutes late for the 2 or 3 prior meetings. Is that what you recall?

Colleague: Well last week was a bit different. I was about 30 minutes late because one of the buses had broken down. I wasn't late for the two prior meetings though. I make sure I get there by about 3.25 pm.

Leader: But I'm really puzzled now. The meeting starts at 3.15 pm and you get here at 3.25 and you call that not being late? Is that what you are saying?

Colleague: Yes, because the first five to ten minutes are usually spent chit chatting and socialising before the real business begins. So that is why I am not late for the real meeting.

Leader: Oh! Well now I understand why you don't think arriving at 3.25 pm for a 3.15 meeting is late! You think the first 10 minutes is a waste of time?

Colleague: Yes, I'm afraid I do.

A principal challenges staff expectations of students

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[1] Robinson, V., Meyer, F., Le Fevre, D., & Sinnema, C. E. L. (2020). The quality of leaders' problem-solving conversations: Truth seeking or truth claiming? *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 20*(4), 650-671

Teacher 1: Look at our kids and where they come from. We can't change who they are.

Teacher 2: We're doing the best we can. It's not us…it's the parents and the lack of support from leadership and lack of resources we have.

Teacher 3 : We are working really hard, going above and beyond, visiting homes and counselling students.

Principal: This is really difficult work and we have been trying to improve the outcomes for our kids for a long time and I see the commitment you have to our kids. I want us to pause and have a look at the student achievement data from a neighbourhood school, which is very similar contextual needs as us, and think about what they have achieved and reflect on their achievement.

Teacher 1: This data shows the schools is a high performing school and you say they are a similar school to us?

Principal: Yes that's right. They experience the same barriers to success as we do, and have achieved very different results.

Teacher 3: So what are they doing, how did they do this?

Practice reflection

1. Have you ever been proven wrong about decision or course of action you have taken? 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?

4. How do you keep your frustrations in check by getting curious, not furious?

Skill building

The purpose of this activity is for leaders to develop skills in recognising when one's own assumptions may be wrong or not shared by others in the moment.

1. Think about a task or project within your current role. Identify an actual (or anticipated) difference you need to resolve with someone else to ensure the project is successful.

2. Record your thoughts about the situation. Consider:

   > naming the possible differences or assumptions

   > how will you check whether they are really differences

   > what inquiry question can you ask to understand the differing points of view

   > how will you collaborate to resolve or bridge any differences.

3. Share your thoughts with a colleague and invite them to review your plan and provide feedback on your evidence of willingness to be open minded.