

The Academy Leadership Excellence Framework



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Background

The vision of the Victorian Academy for Teaching and Leadership (the Academy) is to be a centre of excellence for school teaching and leadership.¹ Under its legislation, it is required to “improve outcomes for school students through the provision of specialised teaching and leadership excellence programs for exceptional teachers and school leaders”.²

The Academy has a critical role to play in the development of school leaders, at all levels, who are highly committed, knowledgeable, and skilled in the development of school cultures in which everyone strives for excellence in themselves and others.

An important step in building leadership excellence through Academy programs is the articulation of a framework that provides an evidence-based description of the leadership practices, capabilities and dispositions that are associated with enhanced and improved student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

The Academy’s Leadership Excellence Framework (the Framework) is based on work undertaken over several years. This work has included reviewing research evidence linking leadership to students’ academic and wellbeing outcomes, investigating leadership development frameworks in comparable jurisdictions, and consulting with Victorian school and system leaders.

To be a strong, sustained, and practical guide for the development of individual leaders, leadership teams and leadership programs, the Framework must be compelling, memorable, and simple. This has required making many difficult choices while it was being developed about what needed to be given more and less prominence. The result is a Framework that avoids a long, fragmented list of capabilities and dispositions³ and instead recognises how excellent leadership requires the integration of a small number of key capabilities across multiple domains, motivated by the right dispositions.

Purposes of the Leadership Excellence Framework

The Framework assists the Academy to:

- > ensure shared expectations and understandings about what constitutes excellence in educational leadership
- > provide a coherent suite of leadership programs that grows the capability of aspiring and current school leaders
- > ensure consistent and high-quality provision of leadership excellence programs
- > offer professional learning that is designed to build the capabilities most strongly associated with improving student outcomes
- > administer a coherent evaluation strategy at individual and program level to measure the impact of learning and growth in leaders’ ability to improve their schools
- > provide a strengthened, highly capable educational leadership pipeline by articulating clear and attractive learning pathways for leaders at different career stages.

¹ Victorian Academy, Strategic plan on a page <https://www.academy.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-07/strategic-plan.pdf>

² Education and Training Reform Amendment (Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership) Act 2021, section 2.6A.4

³ Louden, W., & Wildy, H. (1999). Short shrift to long lists: An alternative approach to the development of performance standards for school principals. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 37, 99-120.

The Framework and its associated resources enable current and aspiring school leaders in Academy programs to:

- > reflect on how their own, and their team's, leadership practice aligns with the Academy's view of excellence
- > plan a coherent professional development strategy for their own, and their team's, journey towards leadership excellence
- > renew their commitment to the pursuit of improved leadership in the knowledge that, through the Academy, they will have access to a suite of high-quality professional learning opportunities.

In summary, by developing excellence in the domains, capabilities and dispositions that are the focus of the Framework, Victorian school leaders undertaking Academy programs will be able to resolve problems, including of teaching, learning and wellbeing, in ways that improve achievement and wellbeing outcomes for students. In addition, the Framework contributes to lifting the status of the profession by making the rigour of its knowledge base and training requirements more explicit.

What is Educational Leadership?

Educational leadership is relentlessly focused on the moral purpose of schools and schooling – advancing the learning and wellbeing of children and young people. It is student-centred in that the interests of students are at the heart of every leadership decision, and when there is tension between the preferences of adults and the interests of students, truly student-centred leaders give more weight to the latter than the former.⁴

Leadership is often described as the exercise of influence in the interest of achieving organisational goals. Such a definition may be inadequate as it fails to identify those sources of influence that distinguish leadership from other forms of influence such as force, coercion and manipulation. The three sources of leadership influence are:

1. the reasonable exercise of positional authority,
2. the admirable personal qualities of the leader, for example, trustworthiness, and
3. the ideas and expertise of the leader.

It is these three sources of influence that distinguish leadership power from the power involved in force, coercion, and manipulation.⁵ It is important that the Academy's leadership offerings teach these distinctions, so Victoria's educational leaders understand them. That way Victoria's education leaders become increasingly skilled and confident in drawing on the sources of influence that constitute leadership, and avoid those sources such as threats, removal of choice and deception that constitute less desirable forms of influence.

Educational leaders can also exercise influence more indirectly by empowering others —that is, by creating the psychological and material conditions that enable others to do something that they would not have previously attempted.⁶

This concept of leadership means it can be exercised not only by those with formal leadership positions, but also by those teachers who do not hold such positions. This is because their leadership can be based on admirable personal qualities, relevant ideas and expertise, or both.⁷ It is the role of all staff to demonstrate educational leadership through student-centred decision making, with leaders at all levels responsible for engaging colleagues in professional discussions about effective teaching.

⁴ Hopkins, D. (2022). *School improvement: Precedents and prospects* (Vol. 12). Melbourne, VIC: Centre for Strategic Education, Victoria; Robinson, V. M. J. (2011). *Student-centered leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

⁵ Fay, B. (1987). *Critical social science: Liberation and its limits*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Robinson, V. (2023). What is distinctive about educational leadership? In R. Tierney, F. Rizvi, E. Kadriye, & G. H. Smith (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed.). London: Elsevier.W

What is Excellence in Educational Leadership?

Educational leadership is distinctive in its institutional purposes, role responsibilities, knowledge base and organisational contexts. While an educational leadership framework may draw on concepts and theories of excellence that inform non-educational leadership, the distinctive nature of the role and complex school contexts means that any such borrowing must be carefully argued and adapted to the work of educational leadership.⁸

Excellent educational leaders and teachers are motivated by the moral purposes that shape their role - to prepare students to lead satisfying and productive lives, to promote their participation in and enjoyment of relevant cultures and communities, and to enhance their autonomy by developing their capacity to lead with confidence and make choices without surrendering to the will of others or to uncontrolled inner drives.⁹

There are important implications of this view of excellence.

1. Leadership excellence is an aspirational goal never finally achieved but always worth striving for.
2. The behaviours required for expert leadership practice will vary from one situation to the next.
3. For any particular situation, expert practice requires a response that integrates relevant knowledge, skills and dispositions.
4. The evaluation of a leader's response to a situation requires consideration of the leader's motives, cognition and behaviour. Hence the importance of dispositions as well as knowledge and skills.
5. Individual leaders need opportunities to identify situations in which they have more and less difficulty crafting an expert response.
6. Excellent leaders understand the need for continuous learning and critical reflection to ensure ongoing improvement.
7. Leadership excellence is developed by experiences that build a repertoire of expert responses to a variety of increasingly complex situations.

Excellence is manifest in those leaders who demonstrate a consistently high standard of practice across multiple leadership domains. Excellence requires a high level of understanding and expertise in the application and integration of the capabilities and dispositions across a wide range of leadership situations.

As an example of such integration, an excellent leader's response to a parent who has been abusive to a teacher because the parent does not agree with some resources selected by the teacher, may require a wise combination of skills and dispositions. These might include open-mindedness about what happened during the incident in question; empathy with the frustration that prompted the parent's abuse; and the courage and skill to explain in a respectful way why such abuse is unacceptable. An excellent leader may also need to draw on relevant educational knowledge to explain why the resources chosen by the teacher, and to which the parent objects, were thought to be appropriate for a particular child.

This example shows how an expert response requires the skilful integration, rather than straightforward application, of separately considered capabilities and dispositions. Overall excellence is acquired by learning how to craft expert responses to a wide range of increasingly complex educational situations. It is the consistent demonstration of expert responses to a myriad of situations that constitutes leadership excellence.

⁸ For further arguments about the distinctive nature of educational leadership see [Extract: Professor Viviane Robinson's foreword to 'School Leadership Expertise' by Jennifer Barker and Tom Rees | Ambition Institute](#)

⁹ See Biesta, G. J. (2020). Risking ourselves in education: Qualification, socialisation and subjectification revisited. *Educational Theory*, 70(1), 89-104; Winch, C. (2002). The economic aims of education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36(1), 101-117.

The Evidence Base for the Framework

A fit for purpose educational leadership framework is shaped by the distinctive nature of the work of educational leaders, flexible enough to be adapted to different educational contexts and different levels of leadership and is deeply informed by the research evidence about how leaders enhance and improve student achievement and wellbeing.

A recent paper by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Menzies Foundation highlights that:

The increasingly complex and challenging contexts within which schools operate can be more effectively navigated when leaders are focused on deepening collaborative capacity. This view of school leadership sees leaders sharing a sense of purpose, drawing on one another's expertise, supporting each other to cultivate collective efficacy, and being committed to growing and developing other leaders within their school.¹⁰

There is now compelling evidence that the quality of school leadership is causally related to the achievement and improvement of students. Much of this evidence has been produced by social economists who have tracked the relationship between shifts in student outcomes and principal turnover and used rigorous statistical controls over potentially confounding background variables.¹¹

A recent systematic review of six well designed studies of principal effects concludes that:

Given the scope of principal effects, we conclude that Leithwood and co-authors' (2004) judgment about school leadership being among the most important school-related factors that contribute to student learning holds up. In fact, the importance of school principals may not have been stated strongly enough in prior work, particularly from the perspective of ... leaders and policymakers seeking to move the needle on student achievement. Indeed, it is difficult to envision an investment in K–12 education with a higher ceiling on its potential return than improving school leadership.¹²

While these analyses tell us that well designed investment in principal development is likely to pay off in terms of improved student achievement and engagement, they tell us less about how the difference is made. Some answers are suggested by several meta-analyses of the published evidence about the links between leadership practices and student outcomes. In summary, in schools where students achieve well above expected levels, the leadership looks quite different from the leadership in otherwise similar but lower performing schools.¹³

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) used qualitative and quantitative reviews of this evidence to formulate the five sets of professional practice that are included in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals.¹⁴ A similar set of practices, called 'domains' at the Academy, are at the centre of the Leadership Excellence Framework.

¹⁰ Elliott, K., Hollingsworth, H., Thornton, A., Gillies, L., & Henderson, K. (2022). School leadership that cultivates collective efficacy: Emerging insights 2022. Australian Council for Educational Research.

¹¹ These studies include Coelli, M., & Green, D. A. (2012). Leadership effects: school principals and student outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 31, 92-109; Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2013). School leaders matter. *Education Next*, 13(1), 62-69; Dhuey, E., & Smith, J. (2014). How important are school principals in the production of student achievement? *The Canadian Journal of Economics / Revue canadienne d'Economique*, 47(2), 634- 66 and Böhlmark, A., Grönqvist, E., & Vlachos, J. (2016). The headmaster ritual: The importance of management for school outcomes. *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 118(4), 912-940.

¹² Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis>

¹³ Robinson, V., & Gray, E. (2019). What difference does school leadership make to student outcomes? *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 49(2), 171-187.

¹⁴ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2014, Revised 2019). *Australian Professional Standard for Principals and Leadership Profiles*. Melbourne, VIC: Education Services Australia.

The Academy ‘domains’ are based on the AITSL Standards for Principals and modified for the Academy. More details on each domain are provided in the next section.

One recent Australian study established strong correlations between school performance, as measured by longitudinal data from the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and teachers’ ratings of their principal’s leadership on practices that are very similar to those included in the AITSL standard.¹⁵

While there is strong evidence that school leaders make a difference to student outcomes and some evidence about the practices that are required to do so, there is far less evidence available about the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are required to enact those practices. Few studies have traced the chain of relationships that link the personal qualities of school leaders (knowledge, skills and dispositions), the practices they employ, the impact of those practices on the quality of teaching, and the impact of that teaching on student outcomes. One exception is a recent intervention study which demonstrated that when middle leaders improved the quality of their collaborative problem-solving conversations with the teachers of target children, those children made accelerated progress in reading and reached or exceeded age-related benchmarks for the first time in three years.¹⁶

In the absence of rich empirical evidence, leadership frameworks from other jurisdictions have been examined and consultations with Victorian school and system leaders held. From this work, conceptual and theoretical arguments about the capabilities and dispositions required to do the work of the five domains in a way that improves the excellence and equity of student learning and wellbeing are included in the Framework and presented below.

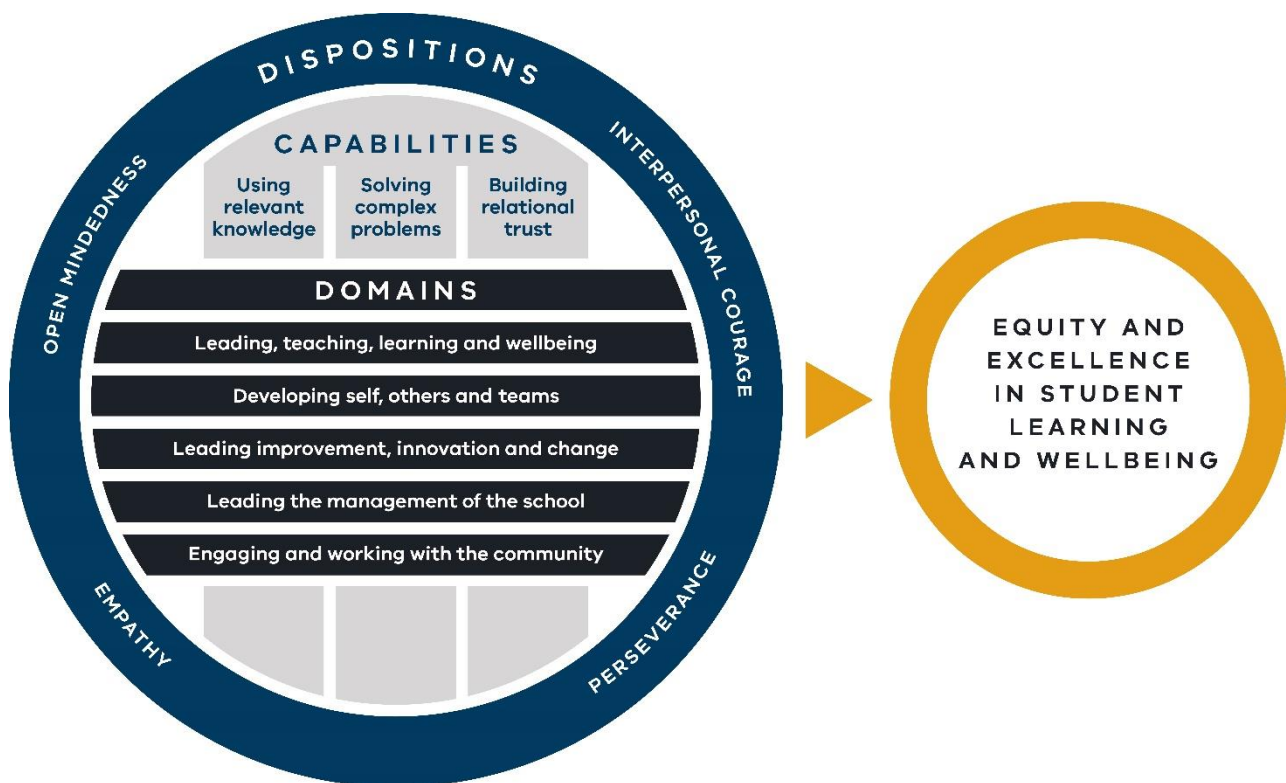
¹⁵ Avenell, K. (2015). *Road Testing Robinson et al (2009) - Does the “theory” work in practice?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Griffith University).

¹⁶ Patuawa, J., Sinnema, C., Robinson, V., & Zhu, T. (2022). Addressing inequity and underachievement: Intervening to improve middle leaders' problem-solving conversations. *Journal of Educational Change*.

The Academy Leadership Excellence Framework

The Academy framework comprises five leadership domains, three capabilities, and four dispositions (Figure 1). The Academy leadership excellence domains are based on those specified in the AITSL National Professional Standard for Principals.¹⁷ The Academy domains describe *what* leaders need to know, understand and achieve to fulfill their role.

Figure 1: The Academy Leadership Excellence Framework



The capabilities and dispositions guide *how* to lead in excellent ways. The three capabilities and four dispositions differ from the AITSL standard by making a clear distinction between leadership skills and knowledge (capabilities) and leadership character (dispositions). Each component of the Framework is elaborated in the next section.

The Framework is fit for the purpose of achieving the Academy mission because it meets three essential requirements. First, it is strongly focused on enhancing and improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes through the provision of specialised professional learning. Second, it is applicable to all leadership roles, including teachers who exercise leadership but do not hold a formal leadership position. Third, it is applicable and responsive to leadership in a wide variety of school and leadership contexts.

The first requirement for a strong focus on improving student outcomes has been met through a robust, but not exclusive, focus on instructional leadership, that is, on the improvement of teaching and learning. This is justified by the research evidence showing that the quality of teaching is the most powerful school-based

¹⁷ AITSL National Professional Standard for Principals <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/australian-professional-standard-for-principals>

determinant of student outcomes.¹⁸ It is through continuous development of leaders' capability to build and sustain teaching excellence, that inequities in student outcomes will be reduced. Building such capability is a considerable challenge, as it requires leaders to work collaboratively to identify, unlearn and relearn leadership and teaching practices that may have contributed to less than satisfactory student learning and wellbeing outcomes.¹⁹ That is why considerable emphasis is given in the Framework to the capabilities and dispositions that enable excellence in the improvement of learning and teaching.²⁰

The Framework meets the second and third requirements of being applicable to all levels of educational leadership and all types of school context. Context is often treated as categorical – categories of school type, school size, socioeconomic status and the like. While such categories suggest some of the features that shape what leaders need to consider in their leadership work and decisions, there are numerous additional contextual features that are unique to a particular school and to any specific problem.

Schools and school leaders are seen as a beacon in their community to support and solve increasingly complex and challenging problems. This suggests that, in addition to a broad understanding of relevant categorical contexts, leaders need the ability to recognise and respond to the unique requirements of each problem they face. That is why, for example, capability in analysing and resolving complex problems is included in the Framework. When leaders are taught a systematic approach to problem solving, they learn how to discern relevant features of their context and take them into account in solving problems that fall in their area(s) of responsibility.

¹⁸ Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(1), 27-42.

¹⁹ Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & Le Mahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

²⁰ Hopkins, D. (2022). *School improvement: Precedents and prospects* (Vol. 12). Melbourne, VIC: Centre for Strategic Education, Victoria.

Domains

A domain is a set of leadership practices linked to a common purpose, such as engaging and working with the community. The five domains of leadership practice that are included in the Academy's Leadership Excellence Framework are:

1. leading teaching, learning and wellbeing
2. developing self, others and teams
3. leading improvement, innovation, and change
4. leading the management of the school
5. engaging and working with the community.

The narrative account below shows how the five domains work together in leadership excellence to contribute to excellence and equity through developing the learning and wellbeing of every Victorian student.

Leading teaching, learning and wellbeing

In this domain, excellent leaders focus on what is planned, taught and assessed and its impact on the learning and wellbeing of students. They ensure a systematic approach to the collection, interpretation and use of valid data to identify areas of good practice and areas for improvement. Excellent leaders understand that improved student learning and wellbeing outcomes are reliant on excellent teaching; and that a focus on one area in isolation can support improvement, but excellence can only be achieved when teachers and leaders work collaboratively across all three areas of teaching, learning and wellbeing.

Developing self, others and teams

Through their close involvement in leading teaching, learning and wellbeing, excellent leaders become aware of areas where teaching practice and student learning and wellbeing outcomes fall short of expectations. Improvement in these areas is achieved through deepening leadership practices that develop self and others as well as through effective leadership of teams.

The domain of 'Developing self, others and teams' is about leading the individual leadership of oneself as well as developing others' leadership potential. Developing teams enables others to develop leadership skills whilst also developing collaborative capacity that enables distributed leadership.

A systematic approach to leading improvement requires strong alignment between the development of individuals and teams and school improvement goals. For example, a school-wide focus on improving math problem-solving may require building the capability of all teachers in teaching mathematical reasoning, building the capability of middle leaders so they can model and evaluate the impact of the desired pedagogy, and building the capability of those in the principal class so they can effectively support and challenge their middle leaders.

Leading improvement, innovation, and change

The domain of 'Leading improvement, innovation, and change' describes more formal team or school-wide improvement processes, such as strategic and annual planning. Leading in this domain focuses leadership actions on realising the vision and strategic plan of the school. Excellent leaders at all levels collaborate with others to implement clear, evidence-based improvement plans and policies.

Leading improvement and innovation involves knowing and understanding context and climate so that a leader can identify the need for innovation and change that is consistent with the school's strategic direction.

Excellent leaders of change communicate the need for change, develop processes and common language around change and continuously consider the impact of change on others.

The intended outcome of these previous two domains of professional practice is excellent leaders who are able to build cultures of continuous improvement in self, teams and schools.²¹

Leading the management of the school

This domain of excellent leadership practice encompasses what leaders must do to create a physical and social environment that enables teachers to teach well and students to learn, thrive and succeed. Managing resources of time, money, materials and personnel are key practices that sit within this domain. Excellence in this domain requires a strategic approach to resource management so there is, for example, a clear alignment between school and team goals and how the time of students, teachers and leaders is allocated.

Improvement cannot happen unless the hundreds of routines required to manage a school effectively run smoothly. Routines that are fit for purpose and consistently implemented free up the time and effort required to solve problems of learning and teaching. Consistent implementation of management routines requires leadership that builds a culture of high standards, reciprocal accountability and collaborative effort.

Engaging and working with the community

This domain involves excellent leaders embracing community through accessing and leveraging the cultural and educational resources of families, thus enabling teachers, parents and caregivers to work together in the best interest of the child. Relationships built on trust are established so the school can learn from and with families, through culturally appropriate and inclusive feedback processes, about their expectations of, and attitudes towards, the school. These expectations are reflected in the school mission and goals, and in locally and culturally appropriate curricula and resources that support every student's learning and wellbeing. Effective partnerships with diverse families and community agencies contribute to an inclusive school culture in which every child's learning and wellbeing are high priorities and in which every child feels they belong.

Capabilities

A capability is a combination of knowledge and skills that enable an individual or organisation to take role-relevant action.²² The Academy's Framework includes three capabilities, and it is important to recognise their interrelationships and how excellence in school leadership typically requires context-specific integration of all three capabilities. Educational leaders demonstrate excellence in their leadership of improvement when they:

1. use relevant educational and non-educational knowledge to
2. solve complex problems of teaching and learning, while
3. building relational trust with those involved.

Using relevant knowledge

This first capability requires educational leaders to be knowledgeable *and* to use that knowledge to analyse and resolve problems that prevent attainment of improvement goals. The background knowledge required is that which is directly relevant to the five domains of leadership practice. For example, competent practice of the domain '*Leading teaching, learning and wellbeing*' requires leaders to have up to date evidence-based knowledge of how students learn and of how teachers develop and promote that learning in diverse classroom contexts.

It should not be assumed that because leaders are usually experienced teachers, they have sufficient educational knowledge to guide the resolution of complex and long-standing problems of student inequity and underachievement, for example. A frequent cause of the persistence of such problems is that teachers, and the leaders who are supporting them, can lack the depth of knowledge required to diagnose the school and classroom-based contributors to such problems and to implement effective strategies to address them.

²¹Robinson, V. (2018). Reduce change to increase improvement. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

²² Winter, S. G. (2012). Capabilities: Their origins and ancestry. *Journal of Management Studies*, 49(8), 1402-1406. Sometimes capabilities are defined as including dispositions as well as knowledge and skills. In this report, dispositions are kept separate to increase attention to their importance.

In short, the required specialist knowledge is often not routinely acquired from classroom teaching experience and so explicit opportunities to deepen and update leaders' domain-specific educational knowledge are necessary. Spillane and Louis note that "without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, content specific pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge and knowledge of learners - school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development."²³

While this capability gives priority to enriching excellent leaders' domain-specific educational knowledge, it also recognises that, in addition to the science of learning and teaching, leaders need knowledge of relevant aspects of leadership and management, and how to use that knowledge in ways that serve educational purposes. Generic courses on leadership and management are unlikely to build the required capability unless there is close attention to how such generic leadership knowledge, such as strategic planning, goal setting and performance management, can be integrated with the relevant domain specific educational knowledge.²⁴

Leaders with moderate to high levels of this capability use their educational knowledge to explain and debate their point of view with those who hold diverse or even contrary views. For example, leaders who cannot give an educational, as opposed to a compliance, rationale for why they want their teachers to use the school's instructional model, will be less confident and less influential in solving relevant student outcome problems than those who can use their knowledge to present their ideas in confident and open-minded ways.

The goal is not that an excellent leader knows everything, but that they know enough to be credible and to know what they do not know, and how to access the resources they need to lead effectively. Deep educational knowledge enables excellent leaders to quickly generate hypotheses about what is occurring, why, and what to do next.

Solving complex problems

Excellent leaders who are strong in the second capability of complex problem-solving tend to work collaboratively, systematically and iteratively through the five stages of complex problem solving (see Fig. 1). Excellence in problem-solving is key to improvement when the school and classroom routines that constitute business-as-usual have not produced the desired outcomes. Systematic inquiry is needed into why an approach has not worked well enough and into what might work better. A systematic approach, as outlined in simplified form in Figure 2, is particularly important when tackling problems of teaching and learning that have previously proved intractable.

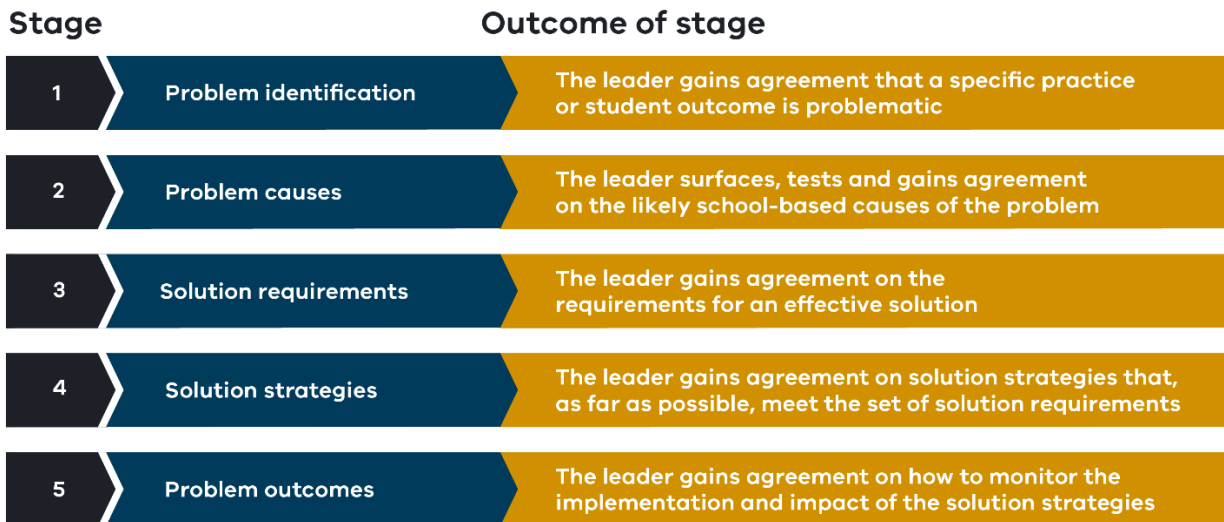


Figure 2: Collaborative Complex Problem Solving (CCPS)

²³ Spillane, J. P., & Seashore Louis, K. (2002). School improvement process and practices: Professional learning for building instructional capacity (p. 97). In J. Murphy (Ed.), The educational leadership challenge: Redefining leadership for the 21st century (pp. 83-104). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

²⁴ For further discussion about the role of domain-specific and generic leadership knowledge in the development of educational leaders, see Barker, J., & Rees, T. (2022). School leader expertise: What is it and how do we develop it? London: Ambition Institute. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/ambition-institute/documents/Ambition_Leadership_report_v2PW.pdf?

The purpose of the first stage (problem identification) is, for example, to test whether there is sufficient agreement that outcomes for particular students are less than satisfactory. The purpose of stage 2 (problem causes) is to generate and test causal hypotheses through a planned inquiry process, before suggesting or selecting solution strategies. There is considerable evidence that leaders who are under pressure move straight from problem identification to problem solutions, omitting discussion of causes and of solution requirements.²⁵

In stage 3 (solution requirements), the purpose is to establish a set of criteria against which to evaluate proposed solution strategies. By making these criteria explicit, effective solutions that address the causes of the problem and meet other practical criteria, like available time and money, are more likely to be crafted. If this stage is undertaken well, the complexity of the problem is addressed by making explicit the tensions and interactions between the various solution requirements.

In Stage 4 (problem solutions), strategies that sufficiently satisfy the set of solution requirements are implemented through a progressively revised action plan. In Stage 5, (problem outcomes) feedback about the quality and consistency of implementation as well as about the impact of the solution strategies on student outcomes is sought and considered.

The complexity of problem solving required of an excellent leader is acknowledged by the fact that school improvement problems frequently comprise multiple nested problems, and that progress through the five stages is seldom linear. The context-specific nature of educational problem solving is addressed by inquiring into the causal contributors and specifying the requirements for an effective and workable solution.

Building relational trust

In education, complex problem solving is nearly always a collaborative effort. Since it is difficult and risky work, excellent educational leaders need to be able to build a culture of trust in which the challenge of improvement is experienced as shared, well supported, and competently led.

Strong capability in building trust encourages a culture of justifiable risk taking, robust dialogue, collective responsibility and reciprocal accountability. In such cultures, teachers will take risks, be less defensive about their difficulties, and be motivated to participate in well-managed collective improvement efforts. Without expertise in building trust, knowledge will not be shared, and levels of trust may be too low to motivate the hard work of improvement.²⁶

The relational capability required to lead improvement is that of building trust while doing the hard work of solving challenging problems. Leaders frequently experience a dilemma between maintaining adult relationships and tackling challenging problems, such as those involved in ensuring excellence in teaching and learning. Excellent leaders with high level of capability in building trust avoid or transcend this dilemma through direct, non-blaming disclosure and discussion of their concerns.²⁷

²⁵ Mintrop, R., & Zumpe, E. (2019). Solving real-life problems of practice and education leaders' school improvement mind-set. *American Journal of Education*, 125(3), 295-344; 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.

²⁶ Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership*, 60(6), 40; Bryk, A. S. (2010). Organizing schools for improvement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(7), 23-30.

²⁷ For the theory and practice that underpins this capability see Robinson, V. (2023). *Virtuous educational leadership: Doing the right work the right way*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin.

Dispositions

Dispositions are included in the Framework because they take us beyond knowledge and skills, to the motivations, thoughts, and emotions of excellent leaders. They enable us to consider not only what excellent educational leaders need to know and do, but also what type of leader they should ideally be.

A disposition is an enduring character trait that is learned throughout life.²⁸ Together, dispositions shape perceptions and motivate behaviour. Desirable dispositions motivate excellent leadership work. The four dispositions in the Academy Leadership Excellence Framework are:

1. open-mindedness
2. interpersonal courage
3. empathy
4. perseverance.

These four have been selected because there is evidence – provided in the subsequent discussion – of their particular relevance to the challenging work of leading educational improvement. Many other dispositions such as integrity, patience, conscientiousness, curiosity, kindness, fairness and optimism are also relevant to the role of an excellent educational leader.

Open-mindedness

Excellent leaders with an open-minded disposition are consistently willing to examine and revise their beliefs. They do so by listening to differing points of view and by 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, while, nevertheless, striving to improve their reasoning through a process of error detection and correction.²⁹ Their stance is one of intellectual humility – of truth-seeking rather than truth-claiming.³⁰

This disposition is important because leaders' decisions about how to solve problems are based on their beliefs about the causes of the problem challenges and how to solve it. Since such beliefs have considerable ethical and practical consequences for the lives and learning of the staff and students involved, excellent leaders have a moral obligation to avoid taken for granted assumptions and to cultivate rigorous thinking in themselves and their colleagues.

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.

²⁸ Sockett, H. (2012). Knowledge and virtue in teaching and learning: The primacy of dispositions. New York: Routledge

²⁹ Hare, W. (2003). The ideal of open-mindedness and its place in education. *Journal of Thought*, 38(2), 3-10; Mazutis, D., & Slawinski, N. (2008). Leading organizational learning through authentic dialogue. *Management Learning*, 39(4), 437.

³⁰ 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

Interpersonal courage

Excellent educational leaders with a courageous disposition are motivated to take risks and overcome their fears to achieve the educational goals to which they are internally committed.³¹ In contrast to the physical courage on which traditional accounts of courage are based, it is interpersonal courage that is required of educational leaders who are committed to the goal of accelerated improvement of the learning and wellbeing of students. This disposition is manifest in excellent leaders' commitment to their students and their willingness to challenge school and team norms, cultures and practices that prevent improved student learning and wellbeing.

As for all the dispositions, extremes are to be avoided. Raw courage is not what is needed. Rather, courage must be moderated by countervailing dispositions such as empathy and open-mindedness. One of the reasons why leaders avoid talking about difficult issues is that they cannot envisage socially acceptable ways of communicating their concerns.³² As leaders become more skilled in speaking in direct and respectful ways, they perceive such conversations as less risky and, therefore, as requiring less courage.³³ Excellent leaders have the levels of personal courage necessary to have the conversations that are required to ensure the student outcomes to which they are committed.

Empathy

Leaders with an empathic disposition have the ability to "...understand and share another person's feelings and emotions – to see things from the perspective of another and understand another's point of view".³⁴ Empathic leaders listen carefully and are sensitive to others' expressed and unexpressed feelings. There are four components to empathy: taking another's perspective; setting aside any pre-judgments about others' feelings and actions; recognising others expressed and unexpressed emotions; and communicating the emotion the leader has recognised in order to check the accuracy of his or her perception.³⁵ Excellent leaders are open-minded about the accuracy of their perception of others' emotions, so they carefully disclose their perceptions and check, rather than assume they have correctly interpreted others' emotional states.

The empathy of excellent school leaders is manifest in more than face to face encounters. They may be troubled, for example, by data about the achievement of some of their students. This may be because they can 'put faces to the data' and empathise with the feelings of students who are not achieving academically. This empathy and sense of moral purpose prevents resigned acceptance and instead encourages appropriate action. In short, excellent leaders care deeply about the lives, learning and wellbeing of their students.

Perseverance

Perseverance is the "...voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties or discouragement."³⁶ It is motivated by a deep internal commitment to the improvement goal, rather than by, for example, bureaucratic requirements or the desire for recognition and advancement. Perseverance is a desirable disposition for excellent educational leaders because it may take several conscientious attempts before difficult problems can be resolved. Improvement attempts can fail because of a culture of repeated initiation and adoption of new approaches, rather than perseverance with the more difficult work of sustaining consistent, high-quality implementation of one or two well thought out strategies.³⁷

³¹ Robinson, V. (2020). Educational leadership and virtuous courage. *Leading and Managing*, 25(2).

³² Hannah, S. T., Sweeney, P. J., & Lester, P. B. (2010). The courageous mind-set: A dynamic personality system approach to courage. In C. L. S. Pury & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *The psychology of courage: Modern research on an ancient virtue* (pp. 125-148). New York: American Psychological Association.

³³ Robinson, V. M. J., Sinnema, C. E. L., & Le Fevre, D. (2014). From persuasion to learning: An intervention to improve leaders' response to disagreement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 13(3), 260-296.

³⁴ Fact sheet 5

³⁵ Tomlinson, C. A., & Murphy, M. (2018). The empathetic school. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 22-27, p. 20.

³⁶ Zaki, J., & Ochsner, K. (2016). Empathy. In L. Feldman Barrett, M. Lewis, & J. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (Fourth ed., pp. 871-884). New York: Guilford Press.

³⁷ Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C./New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, p.229.

Perseverance must be exercised in conjunction with open-mindedness, however, so the excellent leader can recognise when a well implemented strategy is proving ineffective. While improvement efforts may fail because leaders give up on a potentially fruitful strategy too early, they may also fail because leaders persist with a flawed strategy. Excellent leaders' perseverance should be directed towards the improvement goal itself rather than towards the maintenance of a particular strategy for achieving the goal. In short, excellent leaders must "...make a correct appraisal of whether persistence in the face of failure will produce eventual success or simply more failure."³⁸

The overlap between dispositions, for example, between conscientiousness and perseverance, means that, by concentrating on developing the key four dispositions outlined above, others are also likely to be developed.

Conclusion

This paper outlines how the Academy defines leadership excellence and elaborates the knowledge, skills and dispositions that excellence requires. By so doing, it makes transparent the distinctive knowledge base of educational leadership and recognises how that knowledge is firmly anchored in the fast-developing science of learning and teaching and science of wellbeing. It also responds to a need articulated by leaders in schools that a Leadership Excellence Framework will enable them to consider their own areas of focus for development and that of the staff and teams they lead. The Academy Leadership Excellence Framework enables common understanding of leadership concepts, a shared language, and greater clarity about the standard that is required for leadership excellence. The Framework is foundational to the development of a coherent suite of leadership programs and resources, that will prepare educational leaders, and inspire them in a career-long leadership development journey.

The complexity of school leadership means that reasonable arguments could be made for the inclusion of many additional elements in the Framework. Difficult choices have been made about the relative importance, for the purpose of improving teaching, learning and wellbeing, of which elements to include. A framework with too many elements creates cognitive overload and is memorable. In short, the "less is more" adage is relevant.

The Framework is a living document that will be used by the Academy and the profession. It will be reviewed regularly to ensure the evidence is kept up to date.

The Framework is brought alive through:

1. the design of Academy leadership programs that develop excellence through strong alignment of their content to the five domains of leadership practice, the three capabilities and the four dispositions
2. the development of a suite of resources that:
 - a. deepen understanding of the Framework's components and their application to important on-the-job leadership challenges
 - b. support reflection by individual leaders and leadership teams on the match between their current practice and the aspirational standard set by the Framework
3. clear pathways for further professional learning in areas where self-assessment indicates it is desirable.

The quality of school leadership makes an important difference to the achievement, engagement and learning of the students for whom the leaders are responsible.³⁹ That is why the Academy is continually investing in the development of excellent leaders at all career stages, through the design and provision of high-quality Leadership Excellence professional learning programs.

³⁸ Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C./New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, p.229.

³⁹ Hopkins, D. (2022). *School improvement: Precedents and prospects* (Vol. 12). Melbourne, VIC: Centre for Strategic Education, Victoria.

⁴⁰ Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C./New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, p. 204.

³⁹ See footnote 10 for references.

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