



COHESION

Values-based leadership in schools

A mutually agreed set of values delivers benefits for all stakeholders, *Dr Peter Langford*

What is “values-based leadership”?

How would your school score on the statements “I believe in the values of this school” and “Leaders behave in a way that is consistent with the values of this school” (give a score out of 10 for each statement)? If your staff would give an average score of 9 or more on these statements, I can predict with confidence that you have highly engaged staff, manageable levels of staff stress and turnover, high satisfaction of students and parents, innovative operational and teaching practices, and your school is hitting your objectives and managing change well.

Voice Project has completed employee surveys with dozens of schools and 360 leadership surveys with several hundred school leaders, and we have completed similar work across thousands of organisations and leaders in other industries. In this work we assess a wide range of workplace practices and leader behaviours. Belief in an organisation’s values, and leaders living the values,

are more important than a wide range of other workplace practices (including training, pay, workload, performance evaluation, safety, technology, processes, communication) in predicting the success of organisations and leaders.

Values-based leadership involves developing a shared set of organisational values and then using these values as the foundation for leaders’ behaviours and decisions. Values-based leadership is so powerful because values are typically uplifting and future-focused, they set clear expectations that align actions and decisions, and a mutually agreed set of values delivers benefits for all stakeholders.

Developing shared values

I recently asked Beth Blackwood, CEO of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA), about the benefits and challenges of values-based leadership. Beth



Figure 1: The “Big Five”

emphasised that it is critical that “values-based leadership is not just about the Head’s personal values, or the school’s values. Values are successful when they are owned by students, their families and staff. It is shared values that underpin strong organisations.”

Extensive consultation, negotiation and perhaps some compromise is needed to develop an agreed set of values that most stakeholders are comfortable accepting. Workshops can be run to discuss potential values. Surveys can be used to assess current values, desired values, and the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

Each school should have its own set of values that reflect the priorities of its stakeholders and the school’s history, context, and unique characteristics. The values should be worded in a way that has special meaning to the school. If you come up with a set of values that could apply to any school, I’d recommend you stop and reflect to see if the values can be further refined to make them more unique to your circumstances.



Figure 2: The AITSL Professional Practices

You should be aiming for around five high-level values. Far fewer than five and you risk the values not covering enough behaviours and outcomes. Many more than five and the values risk becoming cumbersome to implement and difficult to remember. If you can use an acronym to summarise the values, all the better to help with memory and communication, but you’ll do more damage than good if you develop a contrived set of values simply to make a catchy acronym.

A quick drive-by of my local primary school revealed their values of Safety, Respect and Active Learners displayed on large signs outside the school office and also on the side of a school building. These are noble values. But what values don’t say also speaks volumes. In this case, my local primary school hasn’t mentioned values such as scholarship, sporting performance, creative arts, or the fitness and enjoyment of students. I’m sure all these activities get some level of attention in the school, but perhaps are not given the same priority as safety, respect and

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being active learners. Interestingly, however, from a quick search of the school's website, I didn't find these values mentioned, so I wonder how strong these values really are at the school. As a parent, the presence or absence of strong values influences the level of connection I feel with a school and the likelihood of sending my kids to a school.

As a starting point for selecting values, consider the model in Figure 1. The model represents the "Big Five" categories of human behaviour, which is by far the most researched and evidence-based model of behaviour in psychology. Researchers typically use more esoteric scientific descriptors for each of the five categories of behaviour (openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, emotional stability), but I have reworded these in a way that I hope is a little more useful as a starting point for identifying a range of school values. You shouldn't use the exact wording I have because you need to ensure your values truly represent your unique characteristics. But you should consider values that represent each or most of these categories to ensure that your values are sufficiently broad.

An alternative starting point could be the five leadership Professional Practices recommended by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) shown in Figure 2. It's interesting to note that AITSL also settled on five categories, and there is clear overlap between many of the categories in Figures 1 and 2.

Living the values

Once you have selected your values, you need to put some flesh around how these values will be lived throughout the school. In consultation with key stakeholders, write a handful of bullet points or a short paragraph or two about how the values will show through in the way you set school priorities, recruit and evaluate staff, care for students, build relationships with parents and the community, and manage partnerships with suppliers and other third-party associations.

Critically, if you have a Governance Board, it is essential that the Board is fully supportive of the values and that all Board decision making is shaped by the values. I've seen the successful culture of many

organisations become undone because, despite well-developed values being effectively reinforced within the organisation, the Board was operating with a different set of values. The impact is felt if a school Board selects a principal with values that clash with the existing school culture.

Your values will be most strongly tested during moments of truth. When something doesn't go to plan how do you and your organisation respond? Perhaps your school receives bad media coverage, a staff member suffers an accident on school grounds, or there is an allegation of abuse – how will you behave? From her experience working with hundreds of principals, Beth Blackwood noted "Leading through values is a recurring theme when AHISA members share their 'war stories' – stories of those critical points in their Headship when leadership is tested."

Constant self-reflection and evaluation

In a recent study by Voice Project of over 400 school leaders, we found that self-reflection was one of the key behaviours that predicted job success. Phillip Heath, Head of Barker College and Darkinjung Barker, has written "It can be a temptation as we grapple with the incredible volume of work and 24/7 busyness of Headship to allow the task of self-examination to fall further and further down our list of priorities. Given the indivisible nature of the relationship between our values and our leadership, clearly self-examination at the deepest levels is as critical in our professional lives as it is in our spiritual lives."

Self-reflection takes time and courage and comes in many forms. At an institution level, performance indicators and evaluation tools play a critical role in providing holistic feedback. You and your school should have a balanced scorecard of performance metrics that are clearly linked to your values. All schools will have operational and financial metrics. But do you also regularly survey the satisfaction of your staff, students and families, and gather feedback from these key stakeholders about their evaluation of your current practices – if not, what does that say about what you truly value?

At a more personal level, self-reflection involves leaders finding solitary me time to stop and reflect on whether they

are living their core values. Unfortunately, as humans we are notoriously defensive and good at self-deception. A powerful tool to help self-reflection is 360-degree feedback. An effective 360 tool will require self-assessment against a range of leadership behaviours, gather feedback from other superiors, peers and reports, and benchmark your results with other leaders in similar roles.

Beth Blackwood has observed, "One of the most important 'gaps' for any principal or middle manager to watch for is the gap between how they perceive their own performance and how others perceive it. That can be just as informative as feedback revealing a skills gap. A significant gap is typically evident in the perceptions middle managers have of their own performance and how others perceive that performance. This points to an unwarranted lack of confidence among many middle managers. Addressing that perception gap is one of the benefits of middle managers undertaking a 360-degree appraisal."

There are multiple 360 tools available, and throughout your career it is worthwhile trialling several different tools, because they all provide slightly different insights. Unfortunately, few tools have school benchmarks, so AHISA and Voice Project have partnered to deliver two versions of the School Leadership Survey – one for principals, another for mid-level leaders. The tools assess behaviours structured around the AITSL model in Figure 2, have extensive school benchmarks, and AHISA has a team of ex-principals who provide personal debriefing and action-planning.

Further information

Voice Project is holding free breakfasts and a webinar on values-based leadership in November. To book go to voiceproject.com/breakfast. For further information about 360 tools or staff surveys, contact Beth Blackwood at AHISA on 02 6247 7300 or Voice Project on 02 8875 2800.

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