



COUNCIL OF ONTARIO  
DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION

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# Effective Senior Teams:

Fostering Success through Collaborative Leadership

LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION



# Executive Summary

Every school board and its Director benefit from a strong and dynamic senior team, empowered to be the best version of itself. There is a sound body of research that provides the ingredients necessary to support such a team, as well as offering the cautions of what can derail a group of high functioning individuals. Success requires cultivating the conditions where each member feels safe to share their ideas and to nurture innovation. The atmosphere nurtured must be one of mutual respect and trust, where a stance that favours proactivity and systems thinking is prioritized. Further, purposeful efforts must be made to ensure a diversity of voices are recognized and included, and disruptive thinking is welcomed.

# Introduction

The goals of improved student achievement, and strong student and staff well being are only achieved when strong leadership is nurtured and prioritized. We are leading in rapidly changing times and our teams face a myriad of challenges in the daily execution of their duties. An effective senior team must bring coherence and alignment to their efforts and effectively work together to execute on the priorities they have identified. Our systems have not always recognized a diversity of voices, nor have our leadership teams always reflected the breadth of the districts we serve. A truly successful team is a collaborative and cohesive unit working to model the collaboration, communication and risk-taking we aspire to see in our schools.

***“Strong student and staff well-being are only achieved when strong leadership is nurtured and prioritized.”***

# What the Research Says: The Power of Collaboration

## Diversity

It has been a long-understood axiom that there is strength in diversity. Further, that diversity of thought increases an organization's effectiveness (Patil, Raheja, Nair, Deshpande & Mittal, 2023). We have understood that networks increase professional interaction and that they generate excitement about teaching and learning. That we learn best when "sharing ideas, planning collaboratively, critiquing one another's ideas and experiences and reducing the isolation encountered in most schools." (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). The same can be said of collaboration within senior teams.

## Results Oriented

Further, we learn that a results-oriented culture that focusses on Team over Self leads to an effective senior team. That leaders must be "voracious learners" about their own strengths and areas for growth, and in general foster an environment that welcomes critical feedback, that supports open dialogue that may lead to doing things differently. (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016).

## Systemic Orientation

Fullan argues that systems thinking is key, as a "discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. It keeps them from being separate gimmicks or the latest organization fads. Without a systemic

orientation, there is no motivation to look at how the disciplines interrelate..." (Fullan, 2005).

## Admitting Mistakes

Demonstrating accountability can build trust, strengthen leadership and create a more resilient and effective team. Teams can also become fractured or alienated by an expectation of perfection, which will also inhibit open communication. A team may be afraid to share a mistake if they feel the expectation is to be flawless. If a leader models a willingness to admit mistakes it highlights integrity and creates an environment where others are comfortable doing so. Growth is thereby prioritized over perfection (Chrism, 2025).

## Create Psychological Safety

Overall team performance is enhanced when there is a culture that fosters sharing, transparency and collaboration. Psychological safety is "the notion that taking interpersonal risks within a team is safe." In such an environment the leadership team members are "more likely to take calculated risks, innovate and work through challenges constructively." In short, an environment that allows team members to be vulnerable and in which they experience "psychological safety" is one in which they will thrive. (Patil, Raheja, Nair, Deshpande & Mittal, 2023).

# Legislative and Policy Context

## Collaborative Leadership

[\*\*PPM 159\*\*](#) (2016) speaks to all professionals within education working together. The focus of the PPM is on Collaborative Professionalism which invites building a shared understanding of system priorities, leading to improved student achievement and well being for both students and staff. While recognizing that all voices are valuable, there is also an understanding that conversations should be grounded in evidence, in an environment of trust, built on a shared vision. This invites Directors and Senior Teams to consider the establishment of forums where the voices that represent the full range of employee groups and stakeholders may be heard. A Director's Liaison Table that is framed around common challenges and opportunities, and which allows all employee groups to have a voice should be one such forum.

[\*\*PPM 119\*\*](#) (2013): *Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools*, requires Directors of Education to be intentional and strategic in setting and pursuing equity objectives. Directors are expected to report annually on their progress towards these goals, including efforts to increase diversity within school board leadership teams. This process involves identifying barriers faced by underrepresented communities, consulting with partners, and implementing strategies to foster engagement, recruitment, and retention, including for Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis educators. Objectives

and outcomes should be measurable, reflect ongoing partnerships with students, parents, and diverse communities, and be regularly evaluated to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with board-wide strategic priorities.

[\*\*OLF\*\*](#): The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) developed the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) and the Catholic Ontario Leadership Framework (COLF), with previous support from the Ministry of Education and representation from all school and system related leadership organizations. While this seminal document continues to act as a foundational cornerstone for leadership development and a reference point for senior teams, it requires significant updating to accurately reflect the work of today's system leaders. It outlines the skills, attributes and personal resources that contribute to effective leadership. This work is supported by learning modules that are helpful to a senior team and leaders wishing to delve deeper into particular leadership attributes ([IEL](#)).

[\*\*OCT Standards of Practice\*\*](#) also include Leadership in Learning Communities, advocating for members of OCT to promote and participate in collaborative, safe and supportive communities, while recognizing their shared responsibility and leadership roles (OCT).

# The Role of Directors of Education

As Directors there is much that can be done to foster effective, collaborative teams, including:

- **Establishing broadly shared mission and vision and goals**, by ensuring a transparent and inclusive process of consultation. In Catholic and French systems particular attention must be paid to ensuring that their mandate is carried out, and the values and ethos of their systems is captured.
- **Ensuring the senior team executes**: It will surprise no one in senior leadership to learn that much of one's time can be spent in meetings. As a result, upon completion of the Strategic Plan, one of the most helpful exercises a Director can lead is to take the senior team through an exercise that allows them to prioritize their schedule and "clear their plate" of those activities that are not really adding value/contributing to the goals of the strategic plan (Canic, 2021).
- **Empowering Team members and Distributing Leadership**: When we adopt a stance that all voices matter and that we can all learn from one another, we enhance the opportunities for growth and success. Similarly – all members of a senior team come with talents and knowledge, and thus should be empowered to maximize those gifts. Care should be taken to distribute roles and portfolios equitably while considering demands of individual portfolios, qualifications and competencies, such that no one team member is overburdened. Further, there may be opportunities to rotate the role of chair of the executive leadership team meetings, which will enhance opportunities for different leadership styles to be modelled and to further engage all voices. Finally, all team members should be empowered to view equity and human rights as competencies that they can and should foster in their roles and leadership, so that the work of equity is not limited to one team member or department.
- **Modelling Accountability**: To both support the Superintendent appraisal process and the goals of the strategic plan, the Director should strive to facilitate three formal meetings per year with each superintendent. The first to review their goals for the year, the second to provide an update on progress and the final to review their annual performance plan and/or complete an appraisal of the year, including a self-assessment or reflection from the superintendent themselves.
- **Fostering Connection**: In addition to the formal meetings, Directors should prioritize regular one on one meetings with the senior team, ensuring an "open door" that allows for honest exchanges, and room for questions, strategizing and discussion.

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# The Role of Directors of Education

- **Ensuring Effective Senior Team Meetings:** The executive team when it gathers, represents an “expensive gathering” of individuals. Meetings should be structured to be focused, with collaboratively developed expectations of the shared time. Ensuring meetings are action oriented, with movement toward decisions and results, will validate the time spent together (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016).
- **Supporting Well-Being for Leadership:** Well-being for leadership is fostered when our cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual and physical needs are met. “It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths.” It is about fostering resilience, building capacity around individual well being and strengthening the Personal Leadership Resources, collaborating and communicating as a team, and examining the impacts and remedies to work intensification (IEL). The IEL has a number of [Well-Being Resources](#) that are helpful in this regard based on their work with school and system leaders (IEL, 2020). Simple strategies like beginning a meeting with a well-being check-in to more in depth, honest conversations about the Board’s well-being strategy for staff, and the senior team in particular, will be helpful. Directors need to create space for the team to find balance in their demands, working in ways that best support their personal reality.



# Bringing an Equity Lens to the Leadership Table

## Strength in Diversity

As outlined above, there is both a mandate and a necessity for diversifying our leadership tables. Our senior team positions have not reflected the systems they serve in terms of the composition of our broader staff, nor the students in our schools. Attention to the diversity of our teams will better position the senior team to address the discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and inequitable opportunities that impact our school systems. Further, when we see diversity reflected on senior teams, it will enhance diversity of thought, experience and perspective thus ultimately better serving all students and staff.

## Facilitating Courageous Conversations

At both the senior team table and as leaders it is necessary to create spaces where marginalized voices are raised, and where Equity, Diversity and Inclusion discussions are transparently explored. Honest conversations will be sacrificed when teams are afraid to disturb the “harmony” at the table or if team members are defensive. Team members need to explore and understand their place of privilege/ their own history, while exploring biases and validating the experiences of others (Wing Sue, 2015).

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# Common Challenges

## Dysfunctions of a Team

The historical work of Patrick Lencioni posited the assertion that genuine teamwork remains elusive in most organizations and that there are common dysfunctions that contribute to that lack of cohesion. He refers to the following 5 indicators of dysfunction:

- Absence of Trust
- Fear of Conflict
- Lack of Commitment
- Avoidance of Accountability, and
- Inattention to Results (Lencioni, 2002)

Further, in subsequent work Lencioni unpacked the further complication of “silos” that arise either due to interpersonal conflicts or more commonly due to a lack of a “compelling context for working together.” He therefore suggests that teams need a rallying cry or “thematic goal.” (Lencioni, 2006).

## VUCA

The nature of our times is constant change and uncertainty. Johansen has coined the acronym VUCA which represents **The Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous** nature of our current reality. He does however offer a positive or hopeful variation on VUCA: namely that volatility can lead to vision, uncertainty to understanding, complexity to clarity and ambiguity to agility. And these 4

characteristics are offered as foundational to “the new leadership literacies.” (Johansen, 2017).

## Growth not Perfection

When failures occur, we tend to want to find blame or beat ourselves up. It is more productive to focus on growth, namely – what have we learned and what will we do differently next time? It is important to utilize feedback and feed it forward (Canic, 2023).

## Distractibility and Randomness

At a time when initiatives and the landscape are changing at a rapid pace, it is important to ensure the senior team remains focused on the key identified priorities and does not find itself diverted in a myriad of directions without strong connection and vision.

## Mixed Messages

When people hear that everything is top priority then what they process is that nothing is a top priority. Further – everything a leader does is processed by others, including members of their executive team. Leaders – both the Director and their team – are validated only by what those who follow them experience (Canic, 2021).

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# Common Challenges

## Negativity

Being negative in a meeting is an easy way to appear smart, but negative energy can bring the team down. In order to thrive in a future characterized by disruption, a team leader must encourage, model and reward positive energy (Johansen, 2017).

## Favouritism

Leaders must work diligently to ensure they do not rely on a limited number of voices, particularly, those that they may feel are symbiotic with their own. Leaders must guard against “blind spots.” Every effort should be made to ensure equal consideration of all perspectives, even those which represent a contrary perspective (Dobelli, 2013).

**“When failures occur, we tend to want to find blame or beat ourselves up.**

***It is more productive to focus on growth”***

# Benchmarks for Success

# Benchmarks for Success: Indicators of an Effective Senior Team and Strong Collaboration

- **Safety for Interpersonal Risk-taking:** Team members feel comfortable to speak fearlessly (Patel et al, 2023) and thus involvement is nurtured. Everyone believes their contributions are welcome, and team members are comfortable to respectfully challenge one another, while also practicing active listening.
- **A Coherent Instructional Guidance System:** Through the work of Strong Districts and Their Leadership we have learned the importance of coherence from the leadership team. This is established through an “in-classroom” leadership by district and school leaders, and a shared understanding of ambitious but realistic student performance standards (IEL, Module 2).
- **Utilizing Professional Networks** to advance ongoing leadership learning. This concept extends not only within the senior team itself but in how it interfaces with school and system leaders. This includes modelling thinking characteristics of instructional leadership, without becoming substitutes for principals and vice-principals (Leithwood and Azah, 2016). It also means that the senior team needs to become a learning network, and as leaders there is a modelling of “Reciprocal Leadership” where all around the table have an open learning stance.
- **Be Aware of Personal Bias:** Engage in time to explore the concepts of personal bias, guided by one of many tools to help identify implicit bias (e.g., [Project Implicit, harvard.edu](https://implicit.harvard.edu)) and debrief as a team, to further build psychological safety on the team and eliminate bias on the team (IEL, Strengthening Equity Diversity and Inclusion Awareness).
- **Adopting a stance of Proactivity and Systems Thinking:** Leithwood’s work has positioned these to personal leadership resources as particularly impactful and therefore generating a strong inclination toward “future-oriented action to change and improve the situation” and improving systems thinking capacity will improve overall outcomes, and improve both individual and collective capacity (Leithwood, 2017).
- **Interdependence:** Systems thinking on a senior team is fostered when teams can see their interdependence and understand that they are integral to each other’s success. No one person feels the sole responsibility for any priority but interconnections and supporting roles are identified.
- **Capacity Building and Validation for ALL Senior Leaders:** A strong senior team acknowledges and validates the synergy between the academic and corporate side of the system. Time is taken to build understanding of the respective responsibilities, strategies, limitations and metrics that will determine ultimate success for each and for all.

# Benchmarks for Success: Indicators of an Effective Senior Team and Strong Collaboration

- **Team Building is fostered:** Strengthen trust and relationship on the senior team by providing opportunities to bond as a team and to strengthen their social resources. In Catholic systems such activities can also be built around faith development opportunities.
- **Strong Communication of Plans and Vision:** Ensure the senior team feels consulted and equitably informed about key decisions (as appropriate, respecting confidentiality), building a culture of shared ownership.
- **Staff/individuals are acknowledged:** As staff take risks or share ideas, they are affirmed and when contributions are made and accomplishments attained, there is unbiased/equal validation for those efforts.
- **Building a Culture of Positive Energy:** Amidst all the challenges that characterize the job, it is desirable to create a positive environment in which to work and that infusing positive energy and a spirit of hope is critical to motivation and to success (Kirtman and Fullan, 2016).

## Further Practical Suggestions for Fostering Desired Benchmarks

- As a Director or Superintendent, practice “Friday Afternoon Calls” where you check in with team members; taking a personal interest in team members
- Consider team lunches - both formal and informal
- Respect personal “downtimes” and allow work flexibility, within reason, and where appropriate
- Consider town halls with both team members and broader to glean honest questions and feedback
- When confronted with an individual speaking negatively or concerned about another individual - bring the individuals together and ensure transparent communication
- Book studies that explore desired topics and allow for varied facilitators, and full participation of all voices
- In Catholic Boards - religious gatherings built around a desired theme

# Conclusion: A Successful Senior Team

The attainment of a successful and collaborative senior team is predicated on a relationship of trust and mutual respect. Conditions must foster risk taking and encourage a diversity of voices and experiences. Explicit efforts must be made to nurture team-building and great attention must be given to reflecting on biases, and on ensuring all members of the team feel equally heard and validated. The need to foster an understanding of the interdependence of team members to one another through explicit tools and accountability will better assist in alignment and the attainment of system priorities.



# For Further Reflection

1. In what ways does your senior team ensure that there is psychological safety for all?
2. What specific strategies do you employ with your senior team to ensure you are a learning network?
3. What methods or processes do you employ to ensure senior team meetings are action oriented? How do you revisit outcomes of actions taken?
4. How do you strive to combat “VUCA” and/as well as the potential for “distractibility” with your senior team? With which aspects of VUCA are you struggling?
5. Does the senior team model “reciprocal leadership” and if so, what is the evidence that it does so? If not, how could it be effectively facilitated?
6. How will I know as a Director whether the senior team feels that we are collaborating effectively? How will Superintendents/system leaders know they are collaborating effectively? How will we gain feedback on the perception of our system culture of collaboration?
7. How do you work through conflict as a senior team?

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