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Strategic Leadership in Action

Cultivating System-Wide Leadership Capacity and
Impact at the Senior Level

LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION





Executive Summary

Today's educational landscape demands more from leaders in public education than ever before. Directors of education are expected to deliver on student achievement, operational excellence, and fiscal accountability—all while navigating rapid technological disruptions, increasing polarization, rising mental health concerns, and an urgent call to uphold equity and human rights. In this high-stakes, complex environment, leadership can no longer reside with a single individual. The ability to cultivate strong, cohesive, and capable senior leadership teams has become essential to achieving system-wide impact.

This Leadership Conversation presents a research-informed, action-oriented framework designed to support directors of education in building leadership capacity across their executive teams—including superintendents and senior system leaders. Grounded in the principles of adaptive leadership, organizational learning, and equity-driven practice, it offers practical guidance for fostering teams that are resilient, strategically aligned, and deeply committed to the shared mission of student achievement, well-being, and equity. It is both a roadmap and a call to action for directors seeking to lead with purpose, coherence, and collective strength.



From Individual Skill to Organizational Learning

Traditionally, leadership development has been framed around personal mastery or isolated professional development. However, there is an important shift emerging from developing individual skill sets to nurturing collective learning, and distributed leadership capacity.

In the complex and demanding world of public education, capacity can no longer be viewed as a matter of individual competence; it is the organization's ability to learn, adapt, and act in coherence with its goals. Directors foster this capacity not only by building skills but by creating the conditions for relational learning, shared inquiry, and system-wide responsiveness to the needs of students and staff. This requires strategic alignment to student outcomes, board goals, operational plans, and provincial priorities.

The Director's Role in Building their Team's Leadership Capacity

Leading senior teams toward greater impact requires intentional and sustained effort from the director of education. Research and insights from practitioners suggest five important roles directors must embody to cultivate high-functioning leadership teams.

First, as a *co-architect of team design*, directors are essential in forming and guiding both design and implementation teams. They intentionally align diverse strengths and perspectives with a shared purpose, establishing clarity of roles and fostering cross-functional collaboration. Directors should play a key role in shaping the content and the design of the senior team's professional learning given their unique perspective on the senior leadership context, board and ministry priorities and insights. It signals both investment and buy-in for the learning.

Second, as a builder of team culture, they actively shape the environment through modeling, shared rituals, and values-based leadership that promotes psychological safety, trust, and inclusion. The director's participation as co-learner is essential to the success and development of a culture of learning within the senior team.

Third, in the role of facilitator of adult learning, directors prioritize ongoing leadership development by embedding coaching, feedback, and reflective practice into team routines, while providing opportunities to grow adaptive capacity.

Fourthly, directors create coherence and build alignment between priorities such as those outlined in the Ministry of Education's policies and regulations e.g., [Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act](#), the multi-year strategic plan, student achievement data, board resolutions and school-based issues.

Finally, as strategic communicators, they use data, storytelling, and consistent messaging to create coherence, inspire action, and link team efforts to system-wide goals. These interconnected roles demand time, intentionality, empathy, and vision—qualities essential to leading senior teams that drive transformational change.

The Director's Role in Building their Team's Leadership Capacity

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada & Ontario's Indigenous Education Strategy

As the Ministry of Education declares, 'We are committed to working with Indigenous partners and the education sector to improve access to education for Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in Ontario. This commitment is foundational to Ontario's Indigenous Education Strategy and underlines the vital role of collaboration in leading equitable educational transformation.'

This quote affirms the collective responsibility to engage authentically with Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Embedding their voices, knowledge systems, and pedagogies in our professional learning is not only essential—it is the means by which we transform policy into practice and create culturally safe, and inclusive learning environments.

Effective learning at the senior level moves beyond awareness building, toward meaningful

action and structural change. This includes centering Indigenous voices and leadership, challenging deficit-based narratives, sovereignty, and working in respectful partnership with Indigenous elders, staff, knowledge keepers, and communities. In doing so, senior leaders are not only fulfilling their ethical and legal obligations under the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action](#) but also strengthening their collective capacity to lead schools that are culturally safe and affirming, respectful and academically enriching for Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students.

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Leading leaders means letting go of being the smartest person in the room - and instead becoming the most curious.

- Adapted from Adam Grant (Think Again)

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Designing Professional Learning for Senior Teams

Learning experiences for senior leadership teams must go beyond surface-level engagement. These leaders require specific, contextually relevant learning that reflects the complexity of their roles and the schools and portfolios they lead. The following design principles reflect common themes from research studies and evidence and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), Donohoo, J. (2017), Grant (2021), Katz & Dack (2013), Knowles, Holton, Swanson (2020), Merriam & Bierema (2014), Tulshyan (2022) and Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, Fung (2007)).

Key Design Principles:

01

Ongoing Investment in Trust-Building

02

Practice Disciplined Inquiry

03

Embrace Adaptive Learning

04

Learn in Context

05

Co-Construct the Learning

06

Lead Relationally

07

Uncovering System-Level Gaps in Awareness: A Human Rights and Equity Imperative

Key Design Principles:

01

Ongoing Investment in Trust-Building

Trust is the foundation of meaningful professional learning, especially for leaders. Without trust, there is no vulnerability, no space to confront discomfort of new learning, unlearn bias, or challenge dominant assumptions. Leaders must experience learning environments that model inclusion, foster psychological safety, welcome different perspectives and expect accountable change. Building trust also means addressing the power dynamics inherent in leadership roles and explicitly naming the systemic barriers that often go unspoken. Trust enables the kind of honest, practice and equity-informed reflection that shifts not just individual thinking, but organizational culture.

02

Practice Disciplined Inquiry

Effective leadership learning requires disciplined inquiry rooted in evidence, not intuition or anecdote. Leaders must ask hard questions about whose data is centered, how it's interpreted, and what actions it justifies. This includes interrogating long-standing practices and policies that appear neutral but may sustain disproportionate learning outcomes.

Directors and other senior leaders initiate disciplined inquiry by asking precise, complex questions tied to strategic priorities. For example: What are the root causes of disparities in student outcomes across schools in our board? What leadership practices are most effective in closing these gaps? These questions focus attention on the intersection of student learning, leadership practice, and system conditions.

By consistently working with disaggregated data and identifying patterns of exclusion, leaders sharpen their ability to lead school and system improvement ethically and strategically. Disciplined inquiry cultivates a leadership mindset that is both data-informed and equity-informed.

03

Embrace Adaptive Learning

Leaders operate in dynamic, often unpredictable systems—adaptability is essential. Adaptive learning is about cultivating the capacity to reframe problems, learn from failure, and respond to complexity without defaulting to control. It requires courage to pause, recalibrate, and shift direction. Adaptive leaders are not reactive but reflective; they understand that improving student achievement, increasing operational effectiveness, enacting Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, building positive school and team culture, and human rights and equity, involves ongoing, iterative change rather than quick fixes.

Learning is an ongoing, iterative journey that adapts to the changing needs of professionals and the broader system. By continually reflecting, refining, and responding to new challenges and opportunities, leadership teams foster a culture of continuous improvement that ensures relevance and impact throughout their organization.

Key Design Principles:

04

Learn in Context

Disciplined inquiry is most impactful when tightly aligned with system goals and embedded within a coherent theory of action. Executive leaders play a critical role in ensuring that improvement efforts are not fragmented, but interconnected—linking classroom practice, school leadership, and board-wide strategies in service of student success. At the same time, professional learning that is disconnected from local context risks being ineffective. Leadership development must be grounded in the realities of the communities being served, especially those who have been marginalized or underserved.

This approach requires a deep understanding of the social, historical, and political forces—such as ableism, racism, and systemic poverty among other forms of discrimination that often shape educational outcomes. When leaders understand these realities, they are better positioned to make decisions that are not only evidence-informed, but also responsive, respectful and just for all of the communities they serve. This approach moves leadership beyond compliance or optics, toward meaningful, and sustained system improvement.

05

Co-Construct the Learning

Learning is more impactful when it's co-constructed. This means designing leadership development informed by community. Co-construction shifts professional learning from transmission to transformation. It respects that leadership expertise exists at every level of the organization. Co-constructed learning fosters ownership, accountability, and relevance and is an integral design principle of adult learning.

06

Lead Relationally

Relational leadership emphasizes listening, dialogue, and shared accountability. It's rooted in humility and the belief that no leader is ever finished learning. Leading relationally also means cultivating learning partnerships that challenge with respect and humility to support growth, especially around equitable outcomes and Indigenous Education.



Key Design Principles:

07

Uncovering System-Level Gaps in Awareness: A Human Rights and Equity Imperative

Learning is more impactful when it's co-constructed. This means designing leadership development informed by community. Co-construction shifts professional learning from transmission to transformation. It respects that leadership expertise exists at every level of the organization. Co-constructed learning fosters ownership, accountability, and relevance and is an integral design principle of adult learning.

Leading leaders' learning requires a deliberate and sustained effort to surface the gaps in awareness that exist not only at the individual level but also within the systems they shape and are shaped by. These "gaps" are often embedded in long-standing policies, procedures that go unquestioned despite perpetuating disproportionate achievement, inefficiencies, and inequities. Senior leaders must be supported in identifying how systemic inequities manifest within their spheres of influence and how unexamined norms, assumptions, and privileges can limit their ability to lead system improvements

that meaningfully benefit and fully include all students and staff. This is not simply about professional development; it is about fulfilling legal and moral obligations under The Ontario Human Rights Code and the Education Act.

Embedding equity in leadership learning means equipping leaders not only to recognize their own areas for growth but to advance the education systems they oversee in trauma-informed, and rights-based principles so even more students can access education and fully pursue their dreams.

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Ontario's education system, like others in Canada, is governed by provincial human rights legislation that requires equitable treatment and the proactive removal of discriminatory barriers.

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Professional learning for leaders falls short when it avoids disequilibrium. The goal isn't comfort; it is cognitive dissonance with the primary goal of improving the conditions that result in higher student achievement and wellbeing.

”

Enablers and Challenges in Leading Professional Learning for Senior Leaders

Leading professional learning for senior leaders involves navigating both significant opportunities and complex challenges. Directors and other system leaders play a key role in shaping a culture of continuous improvement, yet they must do so within a dynamic and evolving leadership landscape.

Challenges

Senior leadership development can be hindered by several factors such as:

Turnover

Frequent changes in leadership positions can disrupt continuity in professional learning and hinder long-term capacity building.

Disconnect Between Individual and Collective Learning

While individual leaders may engage in meaningful professional development, there is often a gap in translating this into collective capacity across leadership teams.

Imposter Syndrome

Some senior leaders may experience self-doubt or feel unprepared for their roles given the new and evolving complex realities, which can limit participation in or benefit from professional learning opportunities.

Internal Dynamics

Organizational culture, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships can pose challenges to open, collaborative professional learning among senior leaders.

Enablers and Challenges in Leading Professional Learning for Senior Leaders

Enablers and Opportunities

Despite these challenges, several factors support the growth and development of senior leaders:

Commitment to Continuous Learning:

Many senior leaders demonstrate a strong personal and professional desire to improve their knowledge and skills, reflecting the broader ethos of school boards as learning organizations.

Existing Professional Learning Infrastructure:

District school boards often have structures and practices in place that support ongoing leadership development.

Micro-Credentials and Targeted Learning:

There is increasing value placed on micro-credentials and specific learning experiences that align with both individual goals and system priorities. There are many well-recognized organizations, and universities that offer a diverse array of micro-credential courses for business and academic leaders.

Team-Based Development:

When professional learning is designed to support both individuals and leadership teams, it can build shared understanding and coherence across the system.

In this context, successful leadership development requires intentional design, alignment with system goals, and a responsive approach that considers both the individual and collective needs of senior leadership teams.

**Building the
Learning
Foundation for
Effective System
Leadership:**

**Thinking about
Content of the
Learning**



**Truth and Reconciliation:
Calls to Action**

Continuous Improvement

Business Competencies

Community Engagement

Ethical Decision-Making

Relational Skills

Systems-Thinking

Building the Learning Foundation for Effective System Leadership:

Thinking about Content of the Learning

To lead effectively in today's complex educational landscape, senior leaders must engage in continuous, purposeful learning that is as multi-dimensional as the systems they steward and connected to their Board's Multi-Year Strategic Plan and [Better Schools Better Outcomes](#). [The Ontario Human Rights Commission](#) has issued several reports that outline key areas for learning and transformation that are relevant for the education sector. At the heart of this is the ability to guide teaching and learning across the system—developing a strong foundation in instructional leadership and school improvement on the foundation of operational effectiveness. This includes setting clear priorities for student achievement and well-being, supporting evidence-informed practices, and aligning school and board-wide strategies to ensure coherence and impact. Yet technical expertise alone is not enough. Relational skills—such as emotional intelligence, trust-building, and empathic communication—are equally essential for fostering high-performing, collaborative teams. Leaders must also be deeply connected to the communities they serve to recognize the skills and knowledge needed to serve their children.

In addition to these pedagogical and relational competencies, senior leaders must possess strong business and operational acumen. This includes expertise in financial stewardship, risk management, legal compliance, facilities

planning, and information systems—skills essential for ensuring a well-functioning, accountable, and future-ready organization. Navigating today's challenges also demands adaptive leadership: the ability to respond to uncertainty with creativity, resilience, and a willingness to learn and evolve. This is inseparable from a commitment to equity, human rights, and Truth and Reconciliation requiring an understanding of how discrimination in all its forms shapes students' educational experiences and outcomes. Senior leaders must also exercise political acumen and systems thinking to understand how decisions intersect across departments, policies, and practices. Grounded in data-informed decision-making and sustained by personal resilience, effective leadership is not only about what one knows, but how one learns, adapts, and leads with clarity, integrity, and care.

Conclusion

Capacity Building as a Moral and Strategic Imperative to Improve Student Achievement and Business & Operations Effectiveness

In times of turbulence and transformation, the director of education has a clear and urgent task: to foster leadership that not only adapts to change but responds to the evolving evidence of student outcomes across the system. Capacity building is not a technical add-on—it is a moral imperative, a strategic investment, and an ongoing act of critical hope for more students to feel empowered and equipped to thrive in an uncertain world. By intentionally developing leadership across the senior team, directors create the foundation for public education that is resilient, agile, and grounded in every child's right to succeed. This work is not only complex—it is a deeply human endeavour.

Leading for impact means leading collectively. Directors multiply their influence by cultivating the leadership of those around them, creating conditions for sustained improvement that can weather disruption and drive innovation. In this way, system leadership becomes more than the work of a few—it becomes the shared responsibility of a future-ready team. The future of educational excellence depends not only on the decisions leaders make, but on how intentionally they build the capacity of their teams to lead alongside them.

For Further Reflection

1. How do we know if our leadership learning efforts are actually resulting in better outcomes for those we serve and the challenges faced?
2. What assumptions about leadership and expertise might we need to unlearn to cultivate equitable and responsive systems?
3. In what ways are we co-constructing learning with those most impacted by our leadership decisions?
4. How do we hold ourselves and our leadership teams accountable to human rights obligations in both process and outcome?
5. How are trust, relationships, and emotional safety being fostered as conditions for deeper learning?
6. How are we assessing the impact of the investments in our professional learning?
7. How does your team define a year of successful learning?
8. What system(s) are you using to evaluate the most pressing priorities for learning?
9. How are equity-seeking leaders experiencing leadership development spaces and what changes are needed to ensure their full inclusion, respect, and influence?
10. How does your leadership development strategy support long-term system transformation, not just technical skill acquisition?

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