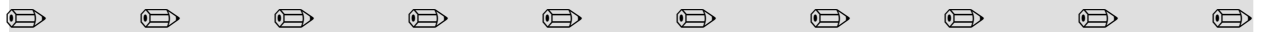


# Designing the School Leader's Portfolio



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Foreword by Linda Lambert

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EDUCATION

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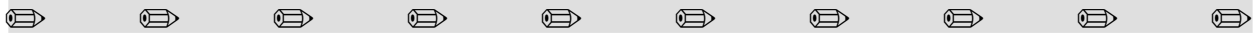
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# Introduction



## **WHAT IS THE SCHOOL LEADER'S PORTFOLIO?**

The school leader's portfolio provides a framework for initiating, planning, and facilitating ongoing professional growth while connecting the purpose and focus of the school leader, the school, and the school community at-large. It is an organizer for reflection and learning as well as a design and a process to help school leaders sustain continuous professional improvement. The portfolio process focuses and integrates goal setting, school plans, and professional learning for the educational leader. In addition, the portfolio contributes to building learning communities and encourages peer collaborations in school systems where it is used as part of an alternative evaluation system or as a tool for professional development. *Designing the School Leader's Portfolio* coaches, or facilitates, the process to optimize learning and collaboration on the part of the school leader.

## **WHO NEEDS THE PORTFOLIO?**

The portfolio process is designed for any person with a leadership position in a school system, including principals and school and district administrators. Some school systems use the portfolio as part of the administrator assessment and credentialing process; others invite school leaders to use the portfolio for individual and group planning and learning; and some school leaders use the process to plan, collaborate, and self-assess. Any combination of these purposes fits with the portfolio design, but it is important for school leaders to clarify the purpose and function of the portfolio at the beginning of the process.

The first reaction of most school leaders to the suggestion that they keep a portfolio is, "I don't have time to fit one more task into my schedule." But participating in the portfolio process this book describes is not an additional task—it is an activity that informs and focuses all the school leader's tasks, making the school leader more efficient in all that he or she does.

The time commitment is minimal—frequent informal meetings with a portfolio partner over coffee, breakfast, or lunch, and a monthly roundtable session of one to two hours. In between, the process demands only reflec-

tion, focused thinking, and data collection. The portfolio process actually reduces the time school leaders spend making decisions or carrying out school plans.

*Designing the School Leader's Portfolio* provides tools to assist school leaders in putting their portfolios together. The tools guide their reflection and group discussion. Portfolio participants do not work alone. They share the process with a portfolio partner and a roundtable group—peer coaches who aid in every step of the process by offering feedback, ideas, and their own experience.

Educators around the globe have used this portfolio design to organize, focus, and facilitate their professional work and learning. To date, the portfolio process has been studied and documented in at least eleven doctoral dissertations. The process continues to evolve as educators contribute their ideas and successes and modify and enhance each phase.

## **BENEFITS OF THE PORTFOLIO**

Traditionally, the focus of a portfolio is self-assessment, a record of professional development, or a record of accomplishments for future employment. The school leader's portfolio combines aspects of the learning portfolio and the assessment portfolio and as such it builds one's capacity for leadership.

Like a learning portfolio, this portfolio provides a location for school leaders to organize thoughts and reflections on learning and describe learning outcomes, and, like an assessment portfolio, the school leader's portfolio contains artefacts and evidence that fulfill prescribed state competencies, standards, or school or student outcomes.

In addition to providing a container to organize materials related to self-assessment, the portfolio offers many other benefits. The very process of assembling the portfolio focuses the school leader's goals and objectives. In addition, the portfolio tracks improvement of leadership qualities and encourages peer discussion and evaluation as well as collaborative learning.

## **CREATING THE PORTFOLIO—THE STEPS OF THE PROCESS**

*Designing the School Leader's Portfolio* takes readers through the four interdependent phases of the portfolio process:

- **Purpose** for work—establish purpose for portfolio
- **Focus** for learning—focus the portfolio and set professional, school-wide, and districtwide goals
- **Process** for collaboration—engage in learning activities and collaborate with peers
- **Outcomes** for improvement—assess outcomes

This book supports recommendations with examples and real-life situations of how the portfolio can make the school leader more effective and a colearner with students and colleagues. It offers a step-by-step process for facilitating and focusing learning.

## **DEFINING AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADER**

The portfolio can help clarify the school leader's goals, strengths, and weaknesses and contribute to their effective leadership. But what qualities make an effective leader?

Leaders in an educational system must have the ability to zoom in and zoom out; that is, leaders must be able to step back and look at the big picture to determine the impact of decisions, mandates, or innovations. Then they must have the ability to shift their focus to the details and again step back to view the big picture. For example, deciding whether to move to a block schedule requires consideration of the following: How do block schedules impact instructional time? Are transportation and other services flexible enough to accommodate the change? Does the change have the support of teachers, parents, community members, and curriculum designers? Most important, what are the benefits of this effort?

It is up to the administrator to coordinate and prioritize all activities and allocate resources in response to student needs, mandates, and community priorities. Administrators must build capacity and commitment among staff members to increase student success. According to Linda Lambert (1998), conditions for building that capacity follow:

1. Hire personnel with the proved capacity to do leadership work, and develop veteran staff to become skillful leaders.
2. Get to know one another to build trusting relationships.
3. Assess staff and school capacity for leadership: Do staff members have a shared purpose? Do they work collaboratively? Is there a schoolwide focus on student achievement?
4. Develop a culture of inquiry that includes a continuous cycle of reflecting, questioning, gathering evidence, and planning for improvements.
5. Organize for leadership work by establishing inclusive governance structures and collaborative inquiry processes.
6. Implement plans for building leadership capacity, and anticipate role changes and professional development needs.
7. Develop district policies and practices that support leadership capacity building. The district should model the processes of a learning organization.

## Defining Leadership: Voices of Wisdom

Before beginning their process of defining standards for and attributes and expectations of educational leaders, members of one group of educational leaders explored leadership definitions. They looked to the following voices of wisdom, who describe their values and purpose as leaders and discuss constructing a learning organization (an environment where one learns and improves continually through experiences and new information), building a sense of community, and recognizing the school as an evolving system.

Cile Chavez, a past superintendent in the United States, states, “My role isn’t so much to make things happen but to make sense of things, to show how things fit together” (1992). To her, a leader is less about doing than being. Her messages of meaning encourage others to seek focus and mission in their work. Sharing this search gives purpose and direction to the school as a system with its members all working together toward common, shared goals.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1993) speaks of redefining leadership. The essence of the revised definition is the importance of the concepts, values, and ideals one brings to the practice of leadership. While management skills and competence remain important and help smooth the way, leaders must rely less on their people-handling skills and more on offering compelling ideas in the form of a mission and purpose others can share. The two banners of *mission* and *purpose* leading the way position the school to be more agile in responding to continual change in student needs and the effects the changing needs have on the school as a system.

Chavez and Sergiovanni highlight the necessity of leaders to align who they are with what they do. Their words invite leaders to focus on their higher purpose of leader as observer, engineer, composer, and facilitator rather than merely manager. Leaders set purpose, focus goals and outcomes, and establish feedback loops to monitor progress and continual learning for improvements. Chavez and Sergiovanni stress the need to build commitment in the school community rather than monitor compliance. In today’s work environment, compliance will not help educators meet the demands of the Information Age and lifelong learning. The revised model of leadership emphasizes the leader’s role of facilitating and organizing the work of the system with all participants contributing to the shared purpose, mission, and vision rather than merely complying with a manager’s ideas. Leadership is more than managing the tasks at hand; it is focusing participants and building their capacity to improve continually. A leader’s philosophy, purpose, values, and beliefs are at the forefront of his or her work. The portfolio process gives leaders the opportunity to construct their philosophy and purpose.

Another voice of wisdom, Arnold Packer (1992) sees the school as a system serving the community as well as serving the future employment needs of the community. He stresses the importance of shared purpose and agreement of focus as an essential element to enable a school system to move forward. Because it helps school leaders align their goals with schoolwide

and districtwide plans, the portfolio process integrates and focuses the goals and shared purpose of educational leaders with that of their system.

The essential element of shared purpose is a foundation for community, with all members sharing in the responsibility to achieve results. The reciprocal processes of constructivist leadership enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling (Lambert, Collay, and Dietz 1995).

Packer also highlights the necessity of shared purpose (1992). The portfolio process begins with school leaders defining their purpose and philosophy in an effort to build a foundation for the goal setting and learning that will follow. In addition, the portfolio is structured around goals, outcomes, and a process for interpreting data related to student learning, connecting the leaders' school plan with district goals and their own professional development.

Peter Senge (1990) has identified a critical element of a learning organization: "The development of collective meaning is an essential characteristic of a learning organization" (241). He states further that

[t]he leader's new work for the future is building learning organizations. This new view of leadership in learning organizations centers on subtler and more important tasks. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning (340).

According to Senge, many of the best-intentioned efforts to foster new learning disciplines flounder because those leading the charge forget the first rule of learning: people learn when they need to learn, not when someone else thinks they need to learn.

In *Renewing America's Schools*, Carl Glickman (1993) discusses the need for disequilibrium in a school system. When learners experience disequilibrium, the unrest that occurs when they face a situation or information that does not make sense to them, they attempt to accommodate the new ideas or situation by calling on past experiences and interactions with people, objects, and ideas to build new understandings. The unrest in a school system that occurs on examination of student learning data leads educational leaders to ask questions such as "Why are we getting these results?" and "What should our focus and goals be to impact a change in outcomes?" Without disequilibrium, learning and improvement do not occur. One would never ask questions such as "Why is this happening?" and "How can I influence change?" Glickman offers the following example of how wisdom and the notion of a learning organization serve educational leaders in moving forward and seeking new results.

Success is the intelligent use of mistakes in self-renewing schools. The moral imperative of the school is for its members to move into their areas of in-



competence: if we already know exactly how to do this work, we should not have the purposeless cycles of educational reform that schools are endlessly caught in. We all need to learn new roles and relationships (91).

The portfolio process encourages reflection on and examination of data as evidence of what works and what does not work to improve student learning.

Michael Fullan (1991) stresses the challenge of decision making in regard to school change initiatives: “The greatest problem faced by school districts and schools is not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical and uncoordinated acceptance of too many different innovations. Changes abound in the schools of today. The role of the district is to help schools sort out and implement the right choices” (197). Through the portfolio process, educational leaders examine their process in new ways.

Peter Block (1993) stresses the need for letting go of the need to control through structures by challenging leaders to look at the key element for change. He states, “If there is no transformation inside of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institution” (44). Block promotes stewardship, which he defines as the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service of others rather than controlling them. Because stewardship requires leaders to choose service over self-interest, it requires a level of trust most leaders are not used to holding. Stewardship requires that leaders be accountable for the outcomes of the institution without acting to define purpose for others, control others, or take care of others. The portfolio process is designed to support and facilitate collaboration and, thus, build a learning community among the school leadership and, in turn, throughout the school community. Having a portfolio partner and participating in portfolio roundtable discussions contribute to building and sustaining a learning community.

Margaret Wheatley (1992) challenges leaders to adapt, to be active learners facilitating a learning community:

I believe that we have only just begun the process of discovering and inventing the new organizational formula that will inhabit the twenty-first century. To be responsible inventors and discoverers, though, we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we cherished, to abandon our interpretations about what does and doesn't work. As Einstein is often quoted as saying: 'No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew' (5).

The portfolio process invites and encourages building learning communities by providing leaders collaborative structures and processes through which they support each other's efforts to become more adaptable. The section that follows provides a review of the background and theoretical underpinnings that drive current understanding of the school as a system and the leader's role and function in that system.

## THE EVOLVING ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

As we move through the next century and consider the challenges facing school systems, it's important to consider the role of leadership in guiding school communities in their mission of education. How will leaders grow professionally in their demanding and ever-changing role? Participation in a leadership portfolio process that aligns goals and enhances collaboration contributes strongly to preparing leaders for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

If learning communities are to be vehicles for processing and responding to the accelerated rate of change in the Information Age, how will leaders build the capacity and commitment for responding to change? The portfolio offers both a structure and a process for building learning communities among educational leaders. Participation in the portfolio process allows leaders to model and experience three of their critical roles: leader as learner, leader as collaborator, and leader as facilitator of learning communities.

The terms *learning organization* and *learning communities* are used with increasing frequency in educational systems. The emergence of learning in an organizational sense is the realization that change has become the norm. Educational systems no longer implement a program, evaluate it for three years, then consider next steps. The pace has been accelerated to the point where constant change is the norm. Educational leaders seek models to assist them in finding and maintaining the balance between the chaos of rapid change and order.

### Key Elements of Organizing School Systems

In *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley combines the concepts of learning communities and evolving systems (1992). Her work with systems cites four key elements involved in organizing and focusing growing school systems: chaos, information, relationships, and vision/purpose. Wheatley compares mechanical systems, such as a car, with living systems, such as an ocean or lake. In mechanical systems, outside forces both break down and repair the system. A mechanical system has limited potential; living systems, on the other hand, have the potential to revive, to grow, to evolve. They are sensitive to environmental changes, such as lack of nourishment, and vulnerable to dysfunction, such as the addition of toxic waste.

In school systems, many environmental changes impact the work; yet, they are outside the system's scope of control. For example, a change in funding, community priorities, or state or federal agency demands can affect the function of the system. These changes require adjustments within

the system, but they are not under the immediate control of the system. Balance within the system is necessary to sustain efforts and commitments and respond effectively to the mandates, demands, and changes.

### **Chaos**

Wheatley also offers guidelines for thriving in a world of change and chaos. Chaos is often caused by the rapid rate of change in a living system. Chaos is a process by which natural systems, including organizations, renew and revitalize themselves. Accepting chaos is essential. Just as disequilibrium is essential to promote learning, so is chaos an essential part of the learning organization. It is through the chaos of new mandates, competing needs, and constant changes that the organization continually seeks to clarify, focus, and understand as it attempts to respond appropriately.

As people move through the process of chaos, new levels of understanding emerge and the system finds a new equilibrium. Systems have the potential to self-organize and reorganize to adapt to environmental changes. Leaders need to embrace that tension between order and chaos in the evolving system and accept it as an essential part of the process of system growth!

Resistance is usually the initial response to change. First, there is doubt the change will really occur; then when it does occur, there is uncertainty about whether the new way can be a success. Self-esteem falters as staff members become concerned about potential changes in job titles and responsibilities. Individuals who can move out of this initial resistance are open to the flow of new information and can search for understanding and thus accommodate the chaos. This reaction actually causes more chaos, but it is through this continual process that the system reorganizes itself and moves to a new sense of order. In response to a need or mandate, the system is renewed as it incorporates new practices and programs.

### **Information**

Successful living systems must have information (Wheatley 1992). Sharing information is an essential organizing force in any organization because information guides and drives decisions. The more members of the system share the information, the better the chance of having new understandings systemwide. Test score data, new standards, research pertaining to learning, and strategies for meeting individual student needs are examples of shared information. This information informs the continually evolving system.

A major challenge is to refine and combine the new ideas without overburdening the system. In other words, letting go of old ways as new ideas and information are included refines the work rather than simply adding more pieces.

Information both forms and informs the system. For information to flow in the organization, trusting relationships, a shared purpose, and clear understanding of each person's intention must exist. The integration of old and new ways requires a willingness to let go of the attitude that states, "This is the way we always do things around here!" By establishing norms for the continuous flow of information within the organization, the leader ensures an environment that recognizes information as an essential element for vitality.

### **Relationships**

The third essential attribute in a living system, according to Wheatley (1992), is relationships. A rich diversity of relationships is needed to energize teams. Relationships are the core of the system. If relationships work, the work goes well; if relationships do not work, the work does not go well. One of the most essential roles a leader plays is creating an environment where trusting professional relationships grow and are nurtured. Conversing about shared purposes, studying together, and learning and problem solving together form the glue that sustains a learning community. Professional relationships provide a bond that sustains focus in the system during times of chaos. The more supportive the relationships, the greater the richness and diversity of ideas and understandings and the greater the commitment to a shared purpose.

### **Vision and Purpose**

The last essential attribute of a healthy system is vision and shared purpose (Wheatley 1992). Leaders must embrace vision as the invisible field that can enable the organization to re-create the workplace and the world. Although vision pulls the whole organization forward, it is not a final destination. The field of vision forms and reforms as the school moves toward a shared purpose and goal. A good starting point is defining the organization's shared purpose and building actions to move forward. Moving forward means understanding, checking in with members of the system, and assessing the success indicators, then continually refining the process. It is the leader's task to create a sense of stability in the unstable environment and to orient others in the system where knowledge is temporary and change is the norm.

Shared purpose and continual improvements are also reflected in Senge's definition of learning communities. He defines learning communities as

groups of individuals who have come together with a shared purpose and agree to construct new understandings . . . a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together (1990, 241).

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# Systemwide Change and the Leadership Portfolio

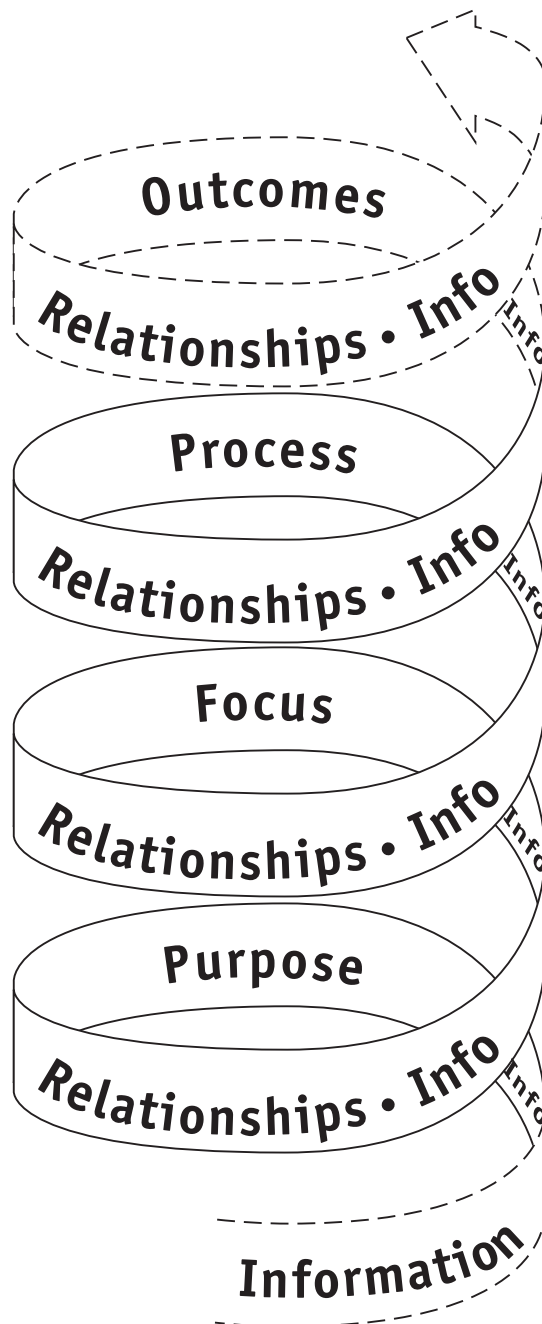


Figure 0.1

An understanding of organizational learning communities and how systems evolve helps leaders establish their own focus and role in the school system. Leaders are primarily responsible for

- managing the balance between order and chaos;
- establishing shared purpose, focus, and goals;
- building and sustaining learning communities with trusting professional relationships;
- sustaining a level of high standards and expectations for all members of the learning community; and
- facilitating the process of information flow throughout the system.

The leadership portfolio process assists educational leaders in building professional learning communities. The process gives them an opportunity to practise “systems watching” as they seek to recognize and develop a capacity to include Wheatley’s four essential attributes of an evolving system. Leaders model the process and establish a professional norm for the system. They set an expectation, by example, of ongoing professional learning, collaboration, and commitment to continual improvements. Thus, leaders advance the purpose and mission for education in the community while they respond to individual student needs and incorporate standards for excellence.

Figure 0.1 depicts the relationship between the systemwide change model and the portfolio process. The flow of information that forms and informs the system requires trusting relationships, a shared purpose, and clear goals. Through its phases of purpose, focus, process, and outcomes, the leadership portfolio sets the stage for each of the elements essential for change.

In the purpose phase, school leaders define the portfolio purpose in relation to their personal goals as well as district expectations; in other words, they determine a shared purpose. In the focus phase, leaders establish goals for the school, the students, and their own professional growth. In the process phase, leaders build the relationships so necessary to change as they establish a collaborative process and work with their peers to achieve the goals they have established. Finally, leaders use information they have accumulated to determine the outcomes of their efforts and set new goals for improvement.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Chapter 1, *The Role of the Portfolio in Improving School Leader Performance*, describes how the administrator’s portfolio can help clarify goals, strengths, and weaknesses and help contribute to effective leadership. Chapter 1 also describes the portfolio system of leadership assessment, which consists of three key activities:

- setting goals and establishing school plans,
- assessing student data to determine success of goals and plans, and
- participating in professional learning activities.

These critical activities are organized, focused, and examined through the reflective, collaborative process of the portfolio. The book includes the purpose, process, and tools for engaging in these activities. Chapter 1 introduces the four phases of the portfolio process and stresses the need to define leadership and the key attributes of school leaders.

Chapter 2, *Establishing a Purpose for the School Leader's Portfolio*, introduces the first of the four phases of the portfolio process: establishing a purpose for the portfolio and defining one's personal philosophy of education. Leaders use this chapter as a starting point for reaching agreement in defining the purpose and function of leadership in a school community.

Chapter 3 addresses the second phase of the process, focus. In *Focusing the Portfolio*, leaders find the tools to establish the goals and specific learning outcomes for the school, the students, and the leader. During the focus phase, leaders generate a banner question, an essential question that becomes their primary focus for learning and work for the year. This question provides the focus by guiding the selection of learning activities and collection of artefacts and evidence.

Once they have established a purpose and focus for the portfolio, leaders move to the collaboration phase. Chapter 4, *The Process of Collaboration and Professional Development*, describes this phase, in which leaders plan their learning activities, actions, and partnerships for reflection and professional collaboration. The chapter offers tools to assist in scheduling and facilitating roundtable discussions to share progress and learning within the portfolio process.

All the activities in the first three phases prepare school administrators for the final reflection and sharing of artefacts, evidence, and learning in the fourth phase, outcomes. Chapter 5, *Portfolio Outcomes for Continuous Improvement*, describes this phase and explains how leaders summarize their learning and plan their next steps.

Chapter 6, *Technology and the Portfolio Process*, contains a technology resource guide with suggestions for using technology to enhance and streamline the portfolio process.

The Appendices contain blackline (reproducible) copies of portfolio worksheets and tools. Copies of all the worksheets and tools appear throughout the text along with samples of worksheets and tools completed by school leaders who participated in the portfolio process.