

# Introduction

Leadership is the most significant and necessary ingredient as a school strives to increase student achievement. An effective school must have a principal who establishes, promotes and fosters positive relationships. When such relationships are focused on achievement, success in school improvement will result.

Summarised, this concept might be stated as a formula:

***It takes the power of relationships with an achievement orientation to move a school forward.***

Successful leaders understand this conceptual formula and recognise both parts as crucial for success.

Leaders can bring this formula to life through activities, structures and systems. The activities and simulations described in this book are designed to build context by creating situations that foster positive relationships. That way a group of individuals emerges as a single, purposeful faculty – one that works together, plans together, and shares the same vision for student and school success. These contextual experiences create metaphors for as long as a year and provide quick reference points and reminders of goals set and lessons learned. They frame ongoing discussions, investigations and perspectives for faculty contemplation, and can be the catalyst for action.

Strong, positive relationships between and among adults and students with a focus on academic achievement provide the foundations for excellence. The lessons and stories about relationships and an achievement orientation remain the same as can be found in a recent compilation of effective schools' studies that Robert Marzano (2004) outlined in *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action* and other literature that highlights the critical nature of positive relationships and an achievement orientation to middle years improvement.

Regardless of the physical structure of the school or its year-level configuration, just as the classroom teacher and team are responsible for building and providing the context for student learning, it is the principal who is responsible for the overall school culture. Leadership's goal should be to create relationships and structures within the school that support individual students as they achieve and grow academically.

## Building the Vision Together (All-School Activity)

**Purpose:** To engage all staff in considering, creating and designing the future of the school through a defined process. This affinity exercise helps identify beliefs that provide the substance as you establish your school's vision, which in turn creates the framework for your school improvement plan.

**Description:** This activity involves reflecting on the hopes, visions, successes and needs of your school. In a room with multiple tables for small groups and space for chart packs and the like, faculty groups will respond in writing to three focusing questions. These will be shared, folded in with other thoughts and ideas until all ideas, hopes and aspirations are displayed. Common themes, patterns and outliers help narrow and condense the dialogue as a single common vision is created. Depending on the size of the group, the process can take up to two hours.

**Process:** Give each person several sticky notes. Then create table groups of equal numbers (four to eight) by dividing participants by birth month for variety. Emphasise that there is no talking allowed for the first part of this activity.

Pose three questions to the staff, allowing about three minutes for individual reflection and writing for each question:

1. What are your hopes and aspirations for our school?
2. What needs attention at our school?
3. How will we know our school is successful?

Individual participants write one idea, sentence or phrase per sticky note.

Next, pair individuals at tables and have them share their answers by showing sticky notes to each other, still with no talking. Pairs combine like answers and devise labels for each set.

Now, have pairs double up and share their set of sticky notes with each other, again looking for like answers. *Talking is now allowed.* Label like categories. Then, on chart pads, each table group posts its labelled sets. Share these with another table. Look for areas of agreement and difference. Move any sticky notes that do not fit into a labelled grouping to the side and label those "singletons". Allow questions to surface as singletons are identified as such. This will spark additional conversation.

## Making Beliefs Visible: Creating a Licence Plate or Slogan (All-School Activity)

**Purpose:** The staff, in teams, will reconnect to their beliefs about children and education through reflection and discussion. Teams will create a licence plate or slogan as a symbol of these beliefs, such as this one:



**Description:** This all-school activity challenges faculty members to think seriously about their educational beliefs and the function and importance of teams, and leads them in examining their school's mission. Then, teams will turn those beliefs into a succinct slogan of five or six words, or a licence plate that communicates to the larger community what those beliefs are.

**Process:** As a faculty, reread the school's vision or mission statement and goals. Review these; then discuss them in teams. Is the vision for the school consistent with your team's beliefs? Where is the intersection? What is missing? What might be added? In teams, do a quick write, individually addressing these questions. Share reflections and find common agreements. Can you prioritise these in an order that works for your team? If so, distill the first one or two into a short sentence that crystallises your team's mission statement. As a group, condense these words even further. The end result should communicate what your team is about. Get creative, even silly; write, post, scribble, refine and edit. Find something with punch that shares what you are about as a team. When you have it narrowed down to one to five words, what is your bottom line, who are you?

**Materials needed:** Scrap paper, projectpaper, textas.

Feedback from the staff about the dragon boat adventure was consistent and positive; this experience built context for working together for student success with renewed understanding. To move forward and to make sure every student will succeed, begin by building on the power of strong relationships.



For some tasks, teamwork is necessary.

**Follow-up:** Post the candid pictures taken during the activity in the staffroom. Ask if these new insights are being used by teams to help all students achieve success. Use language from the activity as challenges surface. Use the debriefing discussion summaries throughout the year as a way to spotlight this opening activity.



By joining hands, most tasks can be achieved.

As relationships are cemented, the school leader must move staff conversation beyond knowing and liking each other to the sharing of ideas and experiences so these conversations will enable exploration of best teaching practices. Honest conversations about teaching methods can tread on sacred ground. Peter Senge (1997) asserts

When you turn the mirror inward and learn to bring forward and scrutinise our practice, we make ourselves open to learning and growing. An effective leader understands this self-reflection stands on trusting and honest relationships aimed at helping students achieve. And when teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise. (p. 19)