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Leading in Tricky Times:

*Sustainable Success
is Systematic*



LEADING IN TRICKY TIMES: SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IS SYSTEMATIC

By InnerDrive



WHY IS LEADERSHIP TRICKY?

Leadership is challenging and will probably always be so because of its close connections with innovation, change and relationships. This has been characterised with the acronym of VUCA, which details the rapidly changing and often chaotic environments that leaders often operate in:

- **Volatile** – the speed and turbulence of change.
- **Uncertain** – the lack of predictability and clarity.
- **Complex** – the interdependence of multiple variables.
- **Ambiguous** – the lack of clear meaning or interpretation.

In a VUCA world, traditional leadership approaches, which are often based on control and certainty, often fall short. What is needed instead is a mindset and skillset rooted in adaptability, clarity and principle-driven action. What schools need now is a high level of what Ron Heifetz would call leadership agility and “the ability to navigate complex challenges, embrace change and thrive in uncertain environments” (Heifetz, 2009). This responsive flexibility is believed to no longer be an optional skill but a core competency for succeeding in VUCA environments, characterised by the ability to pivot strategies while maintaining core organisational values (Saputra & Muliac, 2025).

THE HIDDEN POWER OF PRINCIPLES

If school leadership is always going to be VUCA and we are surrounded by potential sources of interference, then it might be tempting to just throw our hands up in defeat. However, there may be a path to more consistency hidden in our principles. Effective leaders are often driven by a set of core values, non-negotiables or principles that govern their decision-making and don't shift across situations. The importance of values and ethics in educational leadership has a strong research base

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and often sits alongside principles in documents such as the framework for ethical leadership (ASCL, 2019). In uncertain environments, these principles and values act as anchors, providing consistency when circumstances shift and clarity when decisions are complex.

A useful set of leadership principles might include:

- **Curious** – Ask questions, seek feedback and stay open to new perspectives.
- **Evidence-informed** – Use data and research to guide decisions, not just instinct.
- **Intentional** – Act with purpose, not impulse.
- **Consistent** – Align words and actions.
- **Collaborative** – Involve others and build shared ownership.
- **Kind** – Lead with empathy, respect and humanity.

THERE IS HOPE IN HABITS

Bestselling author James Clear talks about the power of ‘Atomic Habits’ and how people default to systems, processes and habits when a crisis hits, energy is low or they just have too much to think about. Habits can be viewed as the consistent patterns of behaviour that emerge from our principles and play out as automated responses or routines. In schools, we see this in the way that leaders create plans, hold meetings and make decisions and in the classroom, how teachers ask questions, set tasks and deal with disengagement. Alongside consistency, our habits help to reduce cognitive load, support emotional regulation and bring stability to teams.

A complementary set of leadership habits might include:

- **Curious** – Seeking first to understand before being understood.
- **Evidence-informed** – Checking for biases and welcoming constructive conflict.
- **Intentional** – Taking a breath or a break before responding to comments or questions.
- **Consistent** – Connecting decisions back to values before making them.
- **Collaborative** – Amplifying the quiet voices.
- **Kind** – Treating staff as people before professionals.

TEAMS NEED TOOLS

Personal consistency is a worthy goal, but for leaders it is also necessary to expand that excellence across teams and the whole school. Lethal Mutation is a term becoming more well known in education and was originally used by Dr W. Edwards Deming to describe how processes or strategies often mutate as they are passed down through a hierarchy, eventually becoming ineffective or even harmful. More recently Dylan Wiliam suggested this unhealthy evolution is a primary reason why well-intentioned educational reforms often fail to improve student outcomes (Wiliam, 2018). Evidence-based, contextually tweaked activities or tools can play a useful role in avoiding this lethal mutation, smooth out inconsistencies across people and help teams to avoid the erosion of process efficacy when things are VUCA.

A scalable set of leadership tools might include:

- **The Johari Window** – Increases self-awareness by exploring which attributes and characteristics leaders share with others, keep hidden and are unaware of.
- **Marble Jars** – Improves relationship management by exploring the levels of credit between people and how it affects connection, trust and engagement.
- **Pre-mortem** – Strengthens decision-making by exploring possible causes of project failure before launch and creating contingency plans and mitigations.
- **Sludge Audit** – Facilitates continuous improvement by exploring the sources of friction and inefficiency within systems and processes that lead to ineffectiveness.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous nature of school leadership is sadly not going away and so leaders must equip themselves with the principles, habits and tools to manage the turbulence. Locating and living by a core set of values or principles is essential for leaders looking to leverage the psychological and emotional anchors that help provide consistency and clarity.

Bringing those principles to life is made much easier if leaders also have consistent patterns of behaviour and automated responses or routines to common situations and decisions. Alongside consistency, these leadership habits reduce cognitive load, support emotional regulation

and help to mitigate the impact of VUCA environments. The final piece of the puzzle for leaders is the collation and contextual refinement of a toolbox which can be flexibly used to maximise consistency across teams and navigate the volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity baked into school leadership.

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William, D. (2018). Creating the Schools Our Children Need: Why What We're Doing Now Won't Help Much (And What We Can Do Instead).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blogs

Embedding ethical leadership in education nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/embedding-ethical-leadership-in-education/

Adaptive Leadership: How Great School Principals Lead for Change newleaders.org/blog/adaptive-leadership-how-great-school-principals-lead-for-change

Books

Duhigg, C (2012) The Power of Habit. Random House.

McKeown, G (2014) Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less. Crown Publishing.



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