

# Leadership Learning in Action

By Chris Lennon & Nada Jarni

## Background

In climates of ever-increasing educational accountability and consequent high community expectations, school leadership continues to be put under intense scrutiny. One of the challenges this highlights is the nature of leadership preparation and succession planning. The increasing complexity of leadership demands the development of planned and systematic professional learning (Ingvarson et al. 2006; Watson 2005). Among the many strategies being initiated by the Catholic education sector, the development of *Leadership in Catholic Schools: Development framework and standards of practice* (the Framework) has been significant. The Framework, developed by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) and the Catholic Education Office Sale, in conjunction with the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), 'captures a distinct set of agreed leadership practices for leaders in Catholic schools' (CECV 2005, p. 2).

## The leadership framework

The Framework demonstrates a positive Catholic response to challenges of the current educational context and has the capacity to provide a strong architecture for the profession at large. It is a robust framework underpinned by national and international research. A strong focus on educational leadership ensures that there is an authentic commitment to the core business of

education: that is, teaching and learning. Research literature supports this position by clearly identifying the important role of leadership in creating effective professional learning cultures in schools (Silins & Mulford 2002; Robinson 2007). Effective professional cultures enable teachers to lead the learning that underpins successful and sustainable improvement of student outcomes.

Central to the Framework are a set of **guiding conceptions of leadership**. Guiding conceptions provide a frame of reference for identifying what leaders in Catholic schools need to 'know, believe and do'. The guiding conceptions are informed by the work of Michael Fullan (2004; 2001) and Richard Elmore (2000). They enable leaders to reflect on five key principles:

- having a clear moral purpose
- building and maintaining relationships
- understanding and managing change
- creating and sharing knowledge
- ensuring coherence and alignment of structures.

It is necessary to consider each principle, its impact and its interconnectedness with each of the others. Effective leaders recognise that complex educational issues require thoughtful analysis of these aspects of school life. The guiding conceptions become a powerful compass for school leaders as they navigate complex decision-making terrains.

Understandings about leadership are further elaborated through the identification of five areas of leadership action, which describe five areas of school life and operation: the Faith Community; a Vision for the Whole School; Teaching and

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Learning; People and Resources, and Community. These provide insight and clarity about the areas of 'school life where leaders can initiate efforts to improve school functioning and student learning opportunities' (CECV 2005, p. 3).

A distinctive feature of the Framework is that it provides a guide for leadership actions at all levels of the Catholic school community. Its design encourages use by teacher leaders, as well as those appointed to formal positions of authority within the school. While it is not competency-based, the Framework has the potential to serve as the basis for accountability and appraisal of both formally appointed leaders and aspiring leaders within primary and secondary schools.

Two main purposes inform the Framework design. The first is to guide the professional learning and development of aspiring leaders, while encouraging teachers to move into leadership positions. Second, the Framework sets out to provide a unifying vision of 'agreed leadership practices' and a basis for assessment against these practices (CECV 2005).

### *Snapshots from action learning projects*

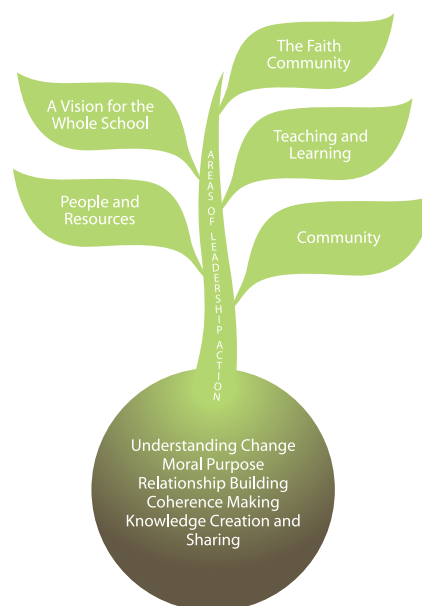
Literature in the field of leadership preparation alerts us to the limitations of leadership training which focuses solely on content and input (Ingvarson & Anderson, 2007). Leadership capabilities are enhanced when there is provision of **both** theory and the opportunity to embed learning in the workplace.

Consequently, in 2006 the CEOM invited school teams to participate in action research projects, funded through the Australian Government Quality Teaching Programme (AGQTP). School teams were targeted, as they provided a vehicle for aspiring leaders to be able to collaborate, solve problems together and, most importantly, be open about the challenges of leadership. This was significant in creating an environment where participants could take the risks necessary for leading and initiating change.

Key themes emerging from this work could be best summarised as follows:

- Conceptualising leadership
- Building leadership capacity
- Invitations to formal leadership
- Performance and appraisal
- Sustaining leadership.

*Figure 1: The relationship between the Guiding Conceptions and Areas of Leadership Action*



*Framework Diagram*  
(Fraynetwork Multimedia 2005)

### *Conceptualising leadership*

Projects in this category strongly echoed the importance of leadership learning as an end in its own right. In particular, participants drew heavily on the Framework's guiding conceptions as a frame of reference.

- **Networked learning.** The Western Deputy Principals' Network used the guiding conceptions to audit and map their professional learning for the year. Survey data collated at the end of the professional learning program clearly indicated that this approach was highly valued, as it resulted in high-quality, comprehensive professional development that catered for the needs of the group.
- **Leadership portfolios.** Leadership portfolios are a potential rich tool for actively and authentically engaging school leaders in their own leadership learning (Ingvarson & Anderson 2007). One example of this was provided by Tim Newcombe of Mount Lilydale College, who used the guiding conceptions as an organisational frame for developing his own electronic professional portfolio. There is significant potential for investigating this area further. In particular there has been interest in the development of leadership portfolios in preparation for principal applications.



Members of the Western Deputy Principals' Network at a CEOM Celebrating Leadership Learning day, the final day for the participants of the AGQTP-funded action research projects.

Photo: Fraynetwork Multimedia

### Building leadership capacity

Generally, projects that typified this category used the areas of leadership actions to frame their professional dialogue. The Framework provided participants with a precise language to name and describe leadership activities. These projects resulted in two related, yet distinct, sets of leadership learning, which included a review of how the leadership team was operating as a unit and, further to this, a monitoring of individual leadership growth.

- **Leadership teams.** Leadership teams invested energy in the creation of simple auditing tools. The power of these tools was often related to discussion about role clarity. These were important as they assisted in building awareness not only of the individual team members' contribution to whole-school priorities, but also in the identification of issues such as boundary crossing and task duplication.
- **Monitoring individual leadership growth.** A range of products was developed to affirm and track individual leadership growth. These varied from the development of simple checklists, to performance-based rubrics. What is critical to note is that these were used by the individuals to set their own **professional learning goals**. These goals translated into action in a variety of ways, from the implementation of formal feedback mechanisms such as **coaching and mentoring** through to the development of **individual leadership plans**.

### Invitations to formal leadership

In these action learning projects, attention was often paid to the important issue of **succession planning**. This succession planning was often, but not solely, underpinned by theorisations of 'distributed' and or 'teacher leader' models (Ingvarson et al. 2006). Teachers at St John's Regional College, Dandenong, and St Joseph's School, Chelsea, were provided with the experience of leading projects while under the guidance of experienced leaders.

The thread tying these projects together was the committed support by principals and/or senior leadership within each school. This was demonstrated by the provision of specific time for on-site professional learning for individuals and/or teams. Beginning leaders were increasingly able to be more explicit about their leadership actions. They were able to monitor their own effectiveness and make determinations about further areas of improvement.

### Performance and appraisal

Both St Anne's School, Park Orchards, and Penola Catholic College in Broadmeadows used the Framework to develop **staff appraisal frameworks**. In addition to this, the Framework has been used as a basis for discussion at **annual review meetings** and for the **development of selection criteria** for leadership positions.

### Sustaining leadership

The important area of leadership renewal and re-energising were independent projects supported by CEOM staff. These projects often highlighted the ways in which the Framework could support leaders in reviewing the relationship between the school's vision statement/charism and leadership practices.

### Harnessing the learning – Future directions

The powerful learning generated from these projects will be used to inform:

- revisions of the Framework
- the development of tools, portfolios and templates to be accessed via the Leadership Standards website (currently under development)
- professional learning initiatives provided by the Catholic education sector.

The richness of the Framework lies in the fact that it is not a leadership manual, but it can be

customised to meet the specific context of each school. It is premised on the powerful notion that leadership learning is an evolving process of continuous improvement. John F Kennedy captured this sentiment when he said: 'Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other'.

The Framework invites experienced and aspiring leaders to take up this ongoing challenge.

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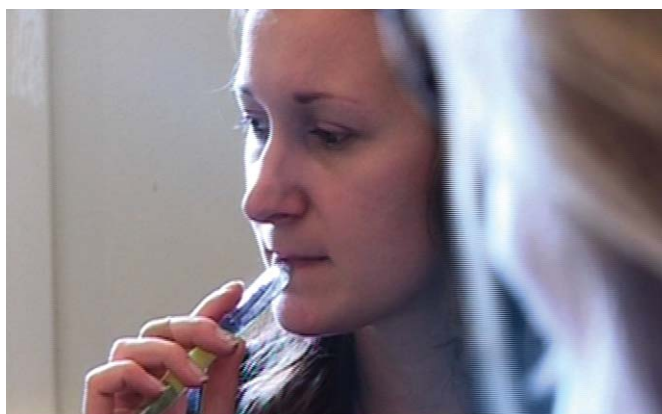
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Kennedy JF 1963, Speech prepared for delivery in Dallas the day of his assassination, 22 November 1963.



A participant at a CEOM Celebrating Leadership Learning day, the final day for the participants of the AGQTP-funded action research projects.

Photo: Fraynetwork Multimedia

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