Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

EIGHT INNER STRENGTHS FOR LEADERS

"The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

OVERVIEW

School and teacher leaders use reflective questions to assess leadership strengths individually, with each other, or as a whole group, and then develop a plan for improvement.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- For self-improvement or school/teacher leader development
- To reflect on and/or establish adult norms for interaction
- To help intentionally cultivate a positive and moral school or classroom environment

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes over multiple sessions (consider using one set of questions at a time)

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- Optional: PDF of reflection questions with rating scale

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

School and Teacher Leaders will:

- Examine and rate their own level of development of specific inner strengths
- Discuss the insights people gleaned from this process
- Use the results to identify strengths and areas for growth
- Develop a strategic plan for personal improvement based on the results

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Purpose
- Humility
- Benevolence
- Moral Compass
- Moral Courage
- Gratitude
- Honesty
- Forgiveness

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Before you begin (whether on your own or with a colleague or small group), pause, take a few deep, conscious breaths, and consider the following:

- Why do I want to do this practice? Because I want to become a better leader, improve my relationships with school staff and students, cultivate a positive school climate, make the world a better place, or something else?
- Am I ready to reflect on my inner strengths as a leader?
- How will I navigate feelings of vulnerability if they emerge?
- Is there a critical friend I can debrief with to get feedback?

INSTRUCTIONS

For character education and other kinds of prosocial development initiatives to be optimally effective and for it to have the optimal impact on the flourishing of human goodness and academic success, school leaders need to

make their own character development a personal priority. In this way, they encourage other adults in the school to commit to their own self-examination and development, in turn, becoming models for students.

BEFORE BEGINNING

There are several ways these questions can be used:

- Simply answer them for yourself, as a self-reflection activity.
- Rate yourself on each question and reflect on any patterns you see (here is a downloadable version):
    - Never or almost never
    - Sometimes but not often
    - Periodically, sometimes
    - Frequently
    - Always or almost always
- Use them to rate another person, either by simply answering them or by using the rating scale.
- Have a group of people, e.g., school staff, engage in a self-rating, and then discuss as a group the insights people gleaned from doing this. If your time is limited, you might choose one quality to focus on at a time.
- Ask staff to rate you using the rating scale, and then compile the results. If you are very brave (courage is a leadership virtue), present the summed results to the staff and discuss them together.
- Do a 360-procedure where you rate yourself, your supervisor rates you, and those you supervise rate you. Then compare the results, and ideally discuss them with others.
- Use the results of any of these procedures to identify strengths and areas for growth. Then create a strategic plan for personal improvement based on the results. What specific characteristics do you want to work on? Create SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely). Consider having an "accountability buddy" to check in periodically to help monitor your progress and keep you on track.

THE QUESTIONS

Noble Purpose

Noble purpose is a purpose that seeks the good and looks beyond what is good for the self to good that serves others and the world in which we live.

- Do you have a clear vision for the kind of school you want to shepherd?
- Is your vision explicitly grounded in clearly articulated values that you consider important?
- Is it focused on goodness, both at the individual level (moral character development of students, for example) and at the communal level (doing good in the world)?
- Do you articulate and share the vision?
- Are you open to feedback and improvement on your vision?

Humility

Humility entails understanding one's own strengths along with one's weaknesses, recognizing that we are all flawed and fallible. Humility allows leaders to serve because it provides the perspective and foundation to put others first rather than feeding one's own ego.

- Do you put the good of the school before yourself?
- Do you focus on others, i.e., do you listen to others, do you care about the well-being of others, etc.?
- Do you admit your mistakes or lack of knowledge, or are you defensive and try to cover it up?
- Do you tell the truth even when it puts you in a bad light?
- Do you take responsibility for the consequences of your actions, policies, and decisions?
- Do you seek help when you need it?
- Do you recognize and rely on others for strengths that they have and that you do not?

Benevolence

Benevolence is a general feeling of care toward the well-being of others. A way of being in the world. To be an effective educational leader means to value and accept all others, including students, staff, and parents and caregivers.

- Do you invest resources (time, money, policy, structures) into taking care of all members of the school community?
- Are the feelings of others important to you?
- Do you authentically care about others? Even the challenging and less likeable others?
- Do you love kids? Even the "frequent flyers" who are often in trouble for misbehaviors?
- Do you recognize that all of us are imperfect?
- Can you avoid being judgmental of others who stumble? Do you see weakness in others as a failing?

Ethical

Moral identity is the degree to which being a morally good person is central to your sense of self. Another way to think of this is the moral compass.

- Do you have a moral compass; is your life directed toward doing what is good and right?
- Is being good more important to you than winning?
- Do you follow the Golden Rule (or the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they would want you to do unto them)?
- Do you consider the consequences of your actions and decisions on others, particularly on their welfare and rights?
- Do you intervene when you see a wrong being perpetrated?
- Can you resist peer pressure, tradition, authority, and/or popular opinion to do what is right?

Moral Courage

Often there are obstacles to doing the right thing. Therefore, leaders also need the courage to do the right thing in the face of fear and threats and other obstacles.

- When tough moral challenges are confronted, do you have the strength to take them on?
- Are you willing to suffer for what is right?
- Can you make the hard decisions, and own them and stick to them?
- Does your staff feel that they can trust you to do what is right, when it is hard to do so?
- Does your staff believe you will have their backs when they are right?
- Do you speak your mind, your truth, even if it is not popular?
- Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone, even put yourself at risk, to do what is right?

Gratitude

Gratitude is a sense of appreciation for what you have and what you have been given. It is the opposite of entitlement, a sense that you have a right to have whatever you have and have been given, which is coupled with a sense of resentment and a focus on what you do not have.

- Do you feel grateful for your life?
- Do you feel grateful for your job?
- Do you feel grateful for the people around you?
- Do you let people know you are grateful for them?
- Do you see the glass as half full and not half empty?
- Do you regularly send thank you notes to staff, students, parents, and others?
- Do you make a daily list of things for which you are grateful?
- Do you encourage others in the school to do likewise or even create structures and practices for them to reflect on and express their gratitude?

Honesty

Being a leader who speaks truth is foundational to so much of what a leader needs to accomplish in general and as a leader of a school of character.

- Do you value truth over harmony and popularity?
- Do you strive to tell what you believe to be true?
- Is it important to you when others do or do not tell the truth?

Forgiveness

To forgive is more about one's inner self than it is about the person being forgiven. It is the motivation and capacity to give up one's anger at a real or perceived wrong, to unburden oneself of those poisonous feelings.

- Do you recognize anger at others as an impediment to your well-being and your effectiveness?
- Do you work to unburden yourself of anger at others?
- Are you able to find constructive ways to move forward from injustices and unwarranted obstacles?
- Can you have healthy relationships with people who have wronged you?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you and/or your colleagues respond to this reflection process?
- What did you learn about yourself and each other?
- Do you notice a shift in your approach to leadership after engaging in this reflection?
- Do you notice any changes in your relationships with students, staff, or parents and caregivers?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A study of 48 leaders and 222 followers within an organization found that when both groups agreed about leaders' descriptions of their own leadership, employees were more satisfied with their leaders, and leaders were more effective. In other words, leaders who have high levels of self-awareness are simply better leaders.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One of the most powerful actions leaders can take to build a positive school culture is to align the school's espoused values with its values-in-action, namely by "walking the talk." Indeed, research has shown that employee retention, performance, citizenship, and emotional commitment to the workplace is higher when there is congruence between the behavior within an organization and the organization's values.

To create this kind of alignment, school leaders need to bring to their awareness the values and behaviors that they themselves demonstrate around leadership and school culture, potentially limiting or augmenting the efficacy of their efforts. Developing this kind of self-awareness is not easy, nor is it quick. However, a study of elementary school principals who used a set of guiding questions to do a deep dive into their inner lives found that this kind of reflective process nurtured their sense of moral consciousness.

SOURCE

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