

THRIVING IN EDUCATION

In the November 2021 issue of *Principled*, we introduced preliminary findings from our member survey **Thriving in Education**. This article brings readers further down the path of the survey results, as we shine a light on how the BCPVPA may influence change in the education system, and explore ways for members to regain a sense of control within their working environment.

PART TWO: Proactive Steps Forward

by

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Thriving in the education system is a complex interplay of many factors. *It is important that we acknowledge the **overall system impact** on member health*, not just at the school community level, but considering the influence from the school board office, the Ministry of Education, along with other stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and the list goes on.

The lion's share of how well a Principal or Vice-Principal thrives is based upon two elements:

- 1) Their own health and well-being: their coping style and ability, their level of burden, and personal life factors
- 2) Their work climate: the tone and behaviours in the environment, work responsibilities, and stakeholder relationships

The survey outcomes are helping us to better understand the workplace factors present when Principals and Vice Principals thrive, even during a difficult time such as the pandemic. Not only do we care deeply for our members' well-being, but we also know that Principals and Vice-Principals are able to create the right environment for others to reach their potential when they themselves operate within a climate that enables them to thrive.

We are exploring how we can better support our members in being proactive in addressing their realities, and how members and the BCPVPA can influence both the challenges and the decisions of stakeholders within the work environment.

Member responses to the survey questions illustrated how they were 'showing up' to work, in terms of their physical and psychological functional status, and their work commitment and motivation levels. These responses were then compared to member responses to questions related to thirteen recognized psychological health and safety risk factors, with the objective of identifying which workplace circumstances were associated with thriving members, or with those who were burning out.

The top notable workplace risk factors associated with both positive and challenged levels of coping were:

- Clear Leadership and Expectations
- Civility and Respect
- Involvement and Influence
- Workload Management and Balance

Our objective is simple: strengthening the ability of Principals and Vice-Principals to thrive. The question is, 'How?' and the answer is two-fold: with strategies for the individual, and strategies for the system.

Taking Back Control

During the many years that I have consulted in workplace mental health, the inevitable statement from employees went something like this: *"The 'Organization' is just going to tell us to suck it up! Have us attend resilience seminars. Put the responsibility on us. This will not address the unreasonable demands and workload!"*

They were right – although most of my clients did not fall in the 'suck it up' category, as they really cared about their employees. Workplace wellness programs focused on mental health education, reducing stigma, directing people to resources, and implementing more services – all very important components in supporting individual mental health.

These interventions are akin to strengthening one's roots – growing deep and strong to hold your life tree solid, stable, and growing, despite the impact of wind, rain, snow, or that grizzly bear who decides to sharpen his claws on your bark! Cultivating broad and strong roots better braces us to withstand the challenging forces found in our working environment that can blow us back and forth. However, focused individual health initiatives – while a necessary and critical part of our fortitude – will not stop the forces of nature that may cause our canopy to bow, or possibly crack a branch!

The BCPVPA is familiar with the many factors that rain down daily on members. Workload pressures, resource shortages, complex issues, relationship strains, and many more issues contribute to a significant battering that we are communicating to stakeholders that include the Ministry of Education and the BC School Superintendents Association.

When we look to further supporting individual members, as I am sure you will acknowledge, we all have gaps in our root system that we can strengthen and deepen to minimize those elements which can infiltrate our level of coping, and ultimately cause us harm. How do we become aware of those gaps, and how do we strengthen our resolve?

We are all on a continuum of mental well-being, from healthy through to ill. You may recall from our November 2021 *Principled* article that the Thriving in Education survey results clearly showed that the large majority of Principals and Vice-Principals are in the 'I'm Fine' zone – which is really the “*I am just OK*” to the “*I am strained*” zone.

How Do We Affect the 'I'm Fine's'?



The level of intervention and resources required differ for those in the green, yellow, and red zones. The largest area of opportunity is to move the needle on the “I’m Fine” group towards the green, healthy zone, and prevent them from slipping into the red.

The unique nature of our committed population of school leaders presents a significant obstacle to helping members expand their root system, since notable change will be driven by self-awareness of thinking patterns and by changing micro-behaviours. The tendency to ‘overcommitment’ and Type A personality exhibited by our member population is a tough mindset to mold, as their core values and beliefs are what make Principals and Vice-Principals strong leaders. And, while a deep sense of purpose is important and a key value, how do we balance this with an ability to set boundaries and allow the same level of commitment to ourselves?

OK: I can hear many of you say, with frustration, “If I hear one more time that I need to set boundaries...”, or “I know that I should exercise, eat well, and sleep better...”, then, “What difference will these things make to what is continuously poured down on me?” Fair questions.

This leads us to the all-important, interim question of “How do we switch the thinking of members from being casualties in the system – understandable due to their exposure to the constant and escalating barrage of issues – to a perspective of an enhanced sense of control?”

What Can We Control

Control – it’s an interesting concept. To help ground our thinking, let’s turn to Stephen R. Covey’s model from his bestselling book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and a concept that you may be familiar with: The Circles of Concern, Influence and Control.

We all experience things in our lives – both at work and at home – that challenge us, possibly causing us stress and even harm. Covey created the clever tool below to help us to address our challenges by being proactive – using these three circles:

The Circle of Concern: all of the things that we are aware of in life that have an impact on us, or in which we have an interest, including ourselves and our relationships.

The Circle of Control: what we can directly control. This is limited to our awareness about ourselves and the actions we take. The key to control lies in the choices we make about how to manage ourselves in three domains – language, emotion, and body.

The Circle of Influence: what we can influence, which is defined by our network of relationships. The key to influence lies in understanding the human condition, authority, conversational skills, and the building of relationships.

The Circle of Concern includes all the trials and concerns that you have in your work and in your life. The task is to realize which of these things are inside, or outside, of your Circle of Control or Influence.

Some things – like the pandemic, Ministry of Education mandates, even the weather – are out of your control, and there's nothing you can do about them. Other things – such as how you respond to certain people, your work performance, and whether you eat healthy or unhealthy food – are totally within your control.

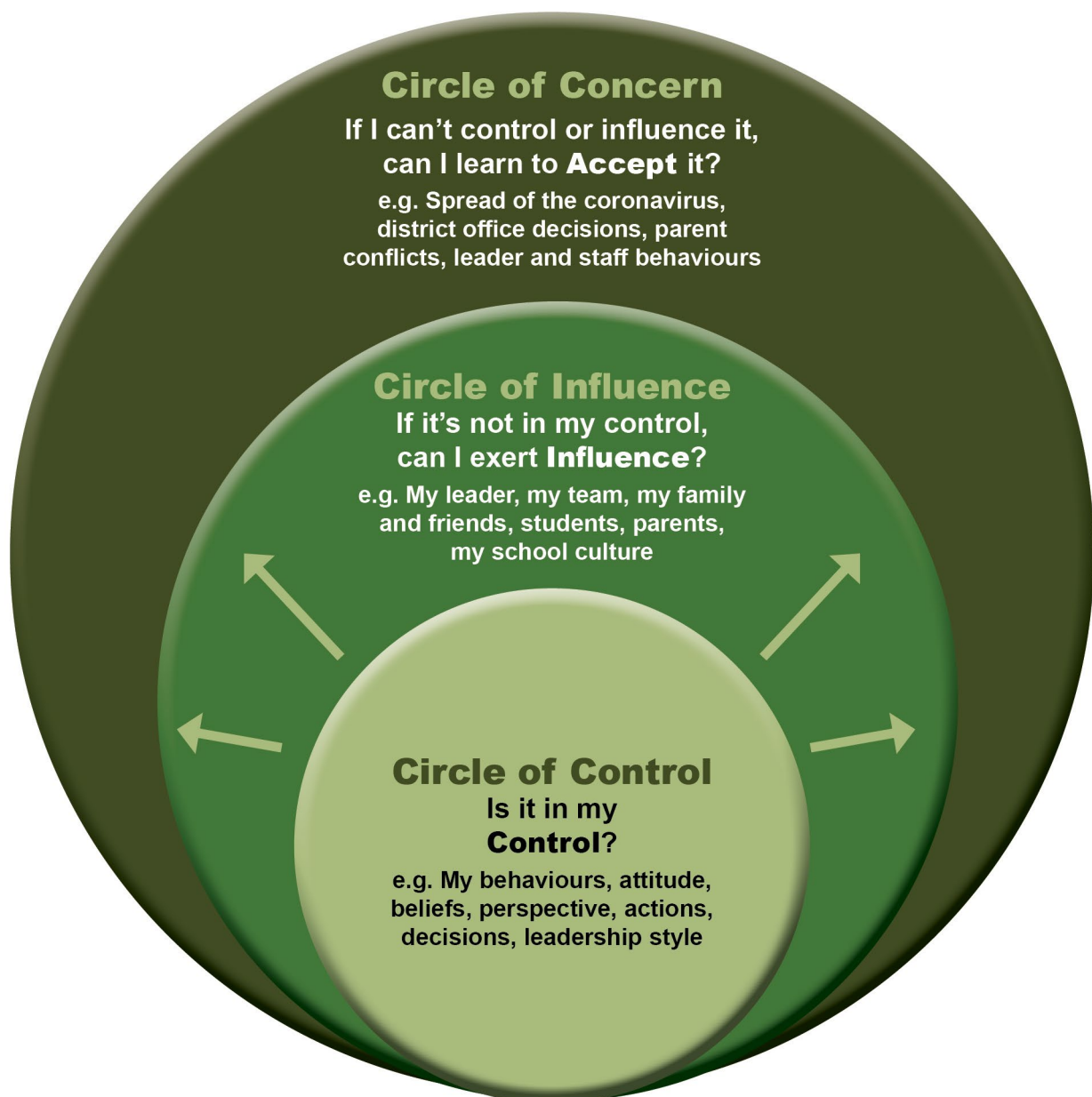


There are things, however, that are in your Circle of Concern, that you can't control directly, but you may be able to influence. This can include your staff's behaviours, student outcomes, even your Superintendent's connection with your school. It goes without saying that understanding your value and how you use what is in your Circle of Control – your behaviors, thinking patterns, and leadership style – can have a tremendous impact on expanding your Circle of Influence.

Being proactive and intentional in your efforts means acting on what you can control and working on expanding your Circle of Influence, taking the action available to you instead of waiting for things to happen.

You will be more resilient from a position of proactivity versus reactivity.

As you can see in the diagram below, the more proactive you are, the more you can expand both your Circle of Control and Influence. This will then result in a smaller space left over within your Circle of Concern.



Adapted from Stephen R. Covey, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1989)

The key to coping and thriving in a space where you have no control or influence is to learn how to accept what is there. For Principals and Vice Principals, this could mean accepting that you cannot do everything, that you have reached capacity, and that you no longer own the problem.

That is not to say that ‘acceptance’ is easy, or even that it’s something you can arrive at on your own. Reaching a point of acceptance may require deep self-reflection and discussions with a peer, a mentor, or a professional counsellor. ***This self-learning and moving to a place of less resistance is an important step to improving your well-being.***

Embracing Workplace Factors That Help Us Thrive

The Thriving in Education survey data results indicated those elements in the workplace that help us thrive:

- Clear Leadership and Expectations
- Civility and Respect
- Involvement and Influence
- Workload Management and Balance

Members responded to an open-ended question that asked them to name one to two things the workplace is already doing well, or that could be enhanced to support their overall well-being and job success.

These themes emerged:

- Provide clear priorities, expectations, and a manageable workload
- Have compassionate leaders that provide direction and recognition
- Be asked for input/feedback on school-based decisions, and provide more autonomy to school-based leaders
- Provide more administration time (particularly for Vice-Principals)
- Increase the number of qualified staff in the system
- Increase the accessibility of district leaders, including regular check-ins

Considering these ‘thriving’ workplace factors, and the member perspectives on thriving expressed above, I invite you to write down your answers to these questions:

1. *“What one to two things do you need, right now, that will provide a healthy boost, and help you to feel better and to have more control at work?”*
2. ***Does your answer to question #1 fit into one (or more) of the circles in the diagrams that follow? If yes, we invite you to contemplate the suggested questions in each area – or craft your own questions that best align with your needs. If your answer to question #1 is no, consider creating your own Circle(s).***
3. *What is your first step, and who can help you?*

We know that many of our members are overwhelmed and struggling; so much so, that doing ‘personal work’ gets pushed aside. This self-neglect can result in a downhill spiral, as your repeated experience is like ‘Groundhog Day’ and continuously reinforces your challenging situation and fatigue. Be intentional and take one small step. Change one micro-behaviour. When that choice is moving you forward, take another step. Find someone to help you – but be careful not to reach out to another whose response is “Yeah; I am stressed too, we all are,” as you both may continue to spiral together. Find a professional – your doctor, a coach, a mentor, a counsellor – someone who will objectively consider where you are, and how to move you forward.

Remember: you are all leaders, and starting this work with yourself is a significant way to expand your Circle of Influence with your team, your students, and even your supervisor through the environment you create.

Concern & Accept

What must I accept regardless of my efforts?
What must I change, either in thoughts or actions,
to move me towards a place of acceptance?
When do I need help to get me to acceptance?

Influence

What actions can I take that may
influence my leader to set clear
expectations and priorities?
What actions can I take that may better
influence staff to align with expectations?
Who could I partner with to
expand my influence?

Control

What can I do to be a good
leader and provide clear
expectations to my team?
What can I do to best focus on
what my leader expects?
What can I do to facilitate more
check-ins with my leader, so
they are up to speed on
school-based issues?

Clear Leadership and Expectations

Civility and Respect

Concern & Accept

What must I accept regardless of my efforts?
What must I change, either in thoughts or actions, to
move me towards a place of acceptance?
When do I need help to get me to acceptance?

Influence

What actions can I take that may influence
individuals in my working circles to treat me
and others with civility and respect?
What actions can I take to influence the outcomes
of situations where a parent, staff member, or other
contact is disrespectful or behaves in
a manner that is harmful to another?

Control

What can I do as a leader to
promote and practice civility and
respect with my team, students,
and the school community?
What can I do to attract better
civility and respect
towards myself?
What can I do if someone does
not treat me with civility
and respect?

Concern & Accept

What must I accept regardless of my efforts?
What must I change, either in thoughts or actions, to
move me towards a place of acceptance?
When do I need help to get me to acceptance?

Influence

What can I change in my behaviour or beliefs
that may increase my chances of being
asked to be involved?
What actions can I take to influence my leader to involve me more,
and/or seek out my perspective and ideas more often?
Where can I be proactive to instill confidence in myself
and demonstrate my competence to others so
they may give me more autonomy?
Who could I partner with to expand my influence?

Control

What can I do as a leader to
promote the involvement of — and
allow the influence of — my staff
and others?
What proactive steps can I take to
share my thoughts and input, so I
feel heard and involved?

Involvement and Influence

Workload and Balance

Concern & Accept

What must I accept regardless of my efforts?
What must I change, either in thoughts or actions, to
move me towards a place of acceptance?
When do I need help to get me to acceptance?

Influence

What actions can I take to influence my leader to be
more aware and empathetic to my workload and the impact?
What information should I prepare and what actions can
I take to lobby for more administration time?
What thought patterns and/or behaviours (e.g., assertiveness) do I
need to learn to be able to set my own boundaries, and to
influence myself and others with respect to expectations.
Who could I partner with to expand my influence?

Control

What can I do as a leader to
demonstrate workload management
and balance for my team?
What actions can I take to build school leaders
and enable the sharing and delegation of duties?
How do I redirect energy that is negative and
reactive into proactive energy for better results?
What are the thoughts, values, and beliefs that
may be keeping me from better managing
my workload (e.g. perfectionism,
anxiety, inability to delegate,
overcommitment), and how
do I address these?

BCPVPA's Own Circles Within the K-12 System

The BCPVPA is concerned about our members. We continue to look for ways that we can expand member capabilities, provide needed support, and influence the education system where our members work.

We are examining the BCPVPA's own Circles of Concern, Influence, and Control and noting how we can proactively influence the perspectives and behaviours of members and others within the system in an effort to promote thriving. We are also assessing the further resources that are needed, and how to best advocate for this support for the Principals and Vice-Principals in BC.

We have shared with the Honourable Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Education, an executive summary of the Thriving in Education survey results

and the November 2021 *Principl(ed)* article. We are looking forward to presenting the data to the Minister and her team, and to opening up this critical dialogue.

We also expect to present the findings to the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) and the BC School Trustees Association (BCTSA), and hope for the opportunity to engage districts in the discussion.

The Thriving in Education survey has helped us to better identify the environmental factors that our members are experiencing daily, and the factors that can help bolster resilience for our members and others in BC's education sector. We are now better informed as to where we can place our focus to strengthen the foundations. We are optimistic that, equipped with this information and the momentum that the survey has generated, we can map out our direction and support action to enhance not only the health and well-being of our members, but that of the students and school communities that our members passionately lead.

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a striped shirt and jeans, sitting on a wooden bench in a school hallway. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting on her chin. The hallway has lockers on the left and a desk with various items on the right. The entire image is overlaid with a green tint.

*Our objective is simple:
strengthening
the ability of
Principals and
Vice-Principals
to thrive.*