



THRIVING IN EDUCATION

Principals and Vice-Principals touch the lives of more than half a million students in British Columbia. They are a beacon of calm in their schools, ready to support, to solve, and to advise.

An element of their work is to establish an educational climate that enables students to thrive, which they can achieve through working directly with students, coaching and motivating staff, partnering with parents, and collaborating with multiple community stakeholders.

by
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Like most people, Principals and Vice-Principals are best able to help others reach their potential when they themselves operate within in a climate that enables them to thrive.

Through previous surveys and conversations with our members, it has become apparent that some BCPVPA members work in environments where they thrive, versus others who work in environments where they are struggling to succeed, and where the outcomes can be physical and/or emotional distress for those leaders. In addition, there is an increasing body of research that speaks to the demands and impact on school-based administrators both here in Canada and globally. This knowledge led us to the question: what are the working climates that help Principals and Vice-Principals to thrive?

There was no better time to ask this question than during one of the most trying years our members have ever endured. And, with that intent, we launched the Thriving in Education survey to our members in the spring of 2021. More than 1,000 members – nearly 40% of our membership – answered more than 150 survey questions, and offered candid and vulnerable responses and commentary.

How well a Principal or Vice-Principal thrives in their role is based upon two elements:

- 1) Their own health and well-being: their ability to cope, 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 Thriving in Education survey focused on the second element: the work climate. Although the survey asked about the prevalence of coping or not coping, and the symptoms of burnout, we did not delve into the behaviours and beliefs that define how an individual supports their personal physical and mental health. While important, that is for another survey.

The BCPVPA provides resources, education, and one-on-one support to guide members on the journey of

enhancing their own recovery and health. This survey takes us to the next step of learning, determining the workplace factors that strengthen our members' ability to thrive. Identifying these factors helps the BCPVPA to work with sector stakeholders and better understand the characteristics of successful workplace environments.

This is the story of our Thriving in Education survey participants.

THE STORY OF A LIGHTHOUSE IN A STORMY YEAR

*"You'll be quite undisturbed here. It's just you and that light, guiding [people] home safely. It's a lonely life, but you'll save thousands."*¹

The analogy of a lighthouse is fitting to the role played by Principals and Vice-Principals during the 2020-2021 school year. Our members may have felt isolated at times, but stood true and held the foundation for staff, students, and parents. They weathered the storm, regardless of what was thrown their way. For some, their core stayed strong despite the battering of the waves; for others, there were cracks. What prevalent factor distinguished these two groups?

THE PREVALENCE OR ABSENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Have you heard of, or practiced, the deep lake meditation (*or*, in our analogy, deep ocean)?

Here is the premise. In the depths of the ocean, all is calm. Regardless of what goes on at the surface – the waves, the storm – we can remain calm, and connect with the inner stillness, depth, and acceptance of the ever-changing moments in our lives. To be still and calm while the surface surges is a very internal process of personal practice and resilience. However, the permission to cultivate that ability at the workplace requires a psychologically safe environment.

¹ "The Lighthouse" Short Story by Noelle Currie, August 2020 25TH AUGUST 2020 <https://www.imagecurve.com/author/noelle/Left Page>

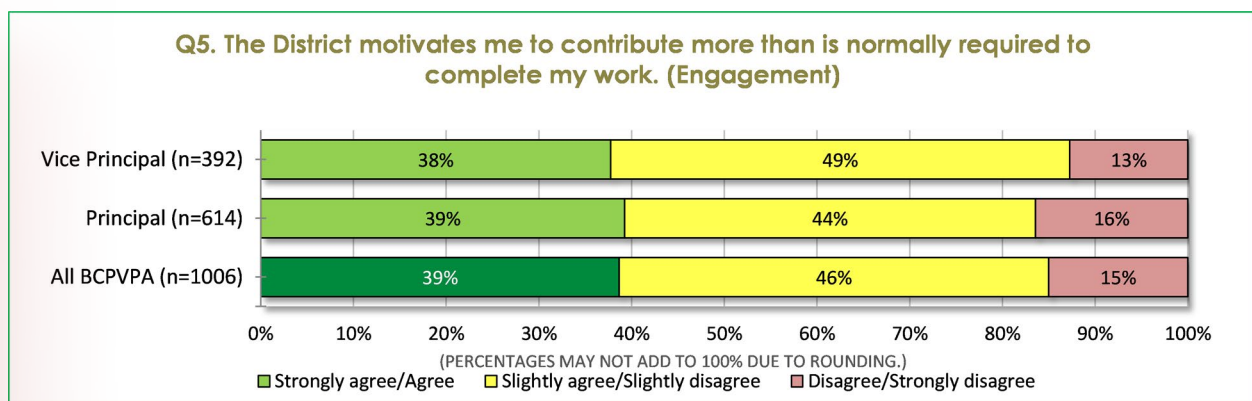
A DISTINCT POPULATION

Our members will likely agree that we didn't need a survey to demonstrate that Principals and Vice- Principals are a distinct population. However, the survey results better illuminate *how* Principals and Vice-Principals differ from many other workers and leaders.

COMMITMENT ISSUES

To begin, we tend to have commitment issues. No: I am not talking about the romantic kind, but about a difficulty in committing to an acknowledgement of being fully well – or of burning out. In our survey, the majority of participant responses hovered in the Slightly Agree/Slightly Disagree zone, which we have affectionately dubbed the 'I'm Fine' group.

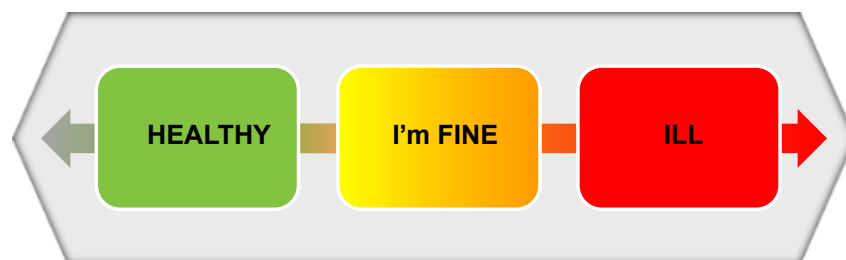
As you can see from this diagram, the 'I'm Fine' group can equate to a significant percentage of the survey respondents.



Having this large group in the “Meh!” zone limits the movement in the data. Analytical math fans know that this makes it difficult to find relationships and correlations within the results.

However, with the data we have, we surmise that the yellow wave indicates that:

- Principals and Vice-Principals are setting a new bar of effort as a hard-working group that deals with significant complexities and responsibilities – with the intensified layer of pandemic leadership – and who, when asked, “How are you”, typically respond “I’m Fine”.
- While a percentage of our member population is doing well, a larger percentage is hanging in there, trying not to move further towards the red end of the mental health continuum. The key will be to help them move towards the green end.



- It is not the norm for this population to exhibit vulnerability and share that they are struggling; they will continue to show up regardless of the toll on themselves.

Which leads us to the second observation ...

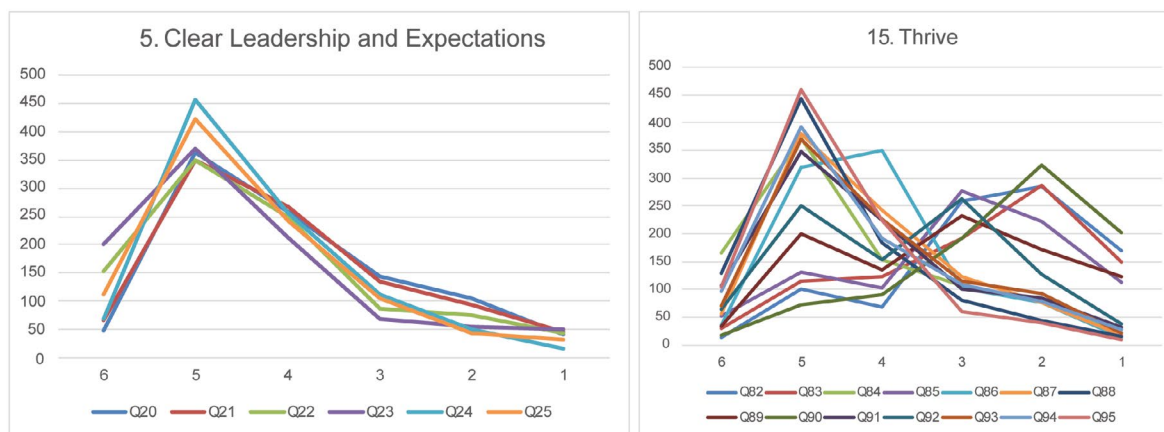
DRIVEN BY PURPOSE

Aside from the characteristic of 'being fine', Principals and Vice-Principals have another trait: a powerful and purpose-driven internal motivation that can trump their own health.

Let me explain.

Research in engagement and burnout would reveal that people who are struggling – physically and mentally, with their battery levels low – also experience a significant reduction in their job motivation, commitment, and mindset.

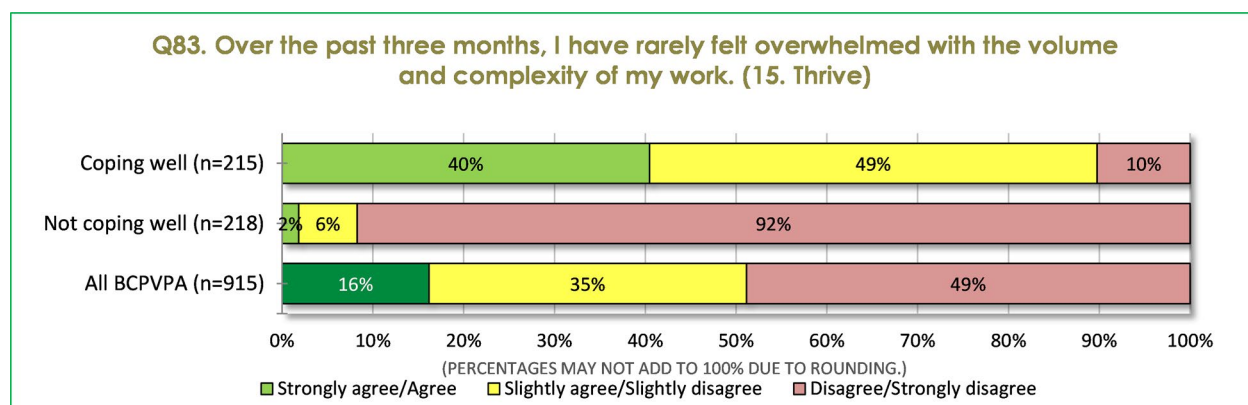
But not this group. In the diagrams below, each line represents the responses to one question. By comparison, in the Clear Leadership and Expectations graph, the responses follow an aligned pattern that usually indicates that each question is measuring the same thing. However, with our 'Thrive' metric, the visual becomes *very* messy, with two peaks. *How is that possible?* Well, one peak is created by the responses to questions that relate to motivation and commitment, while the other relates to energy, cognitive function, and overall health. We would expect the lines to more clearly match the leadership chart, but here is where our group diverges from the norm.

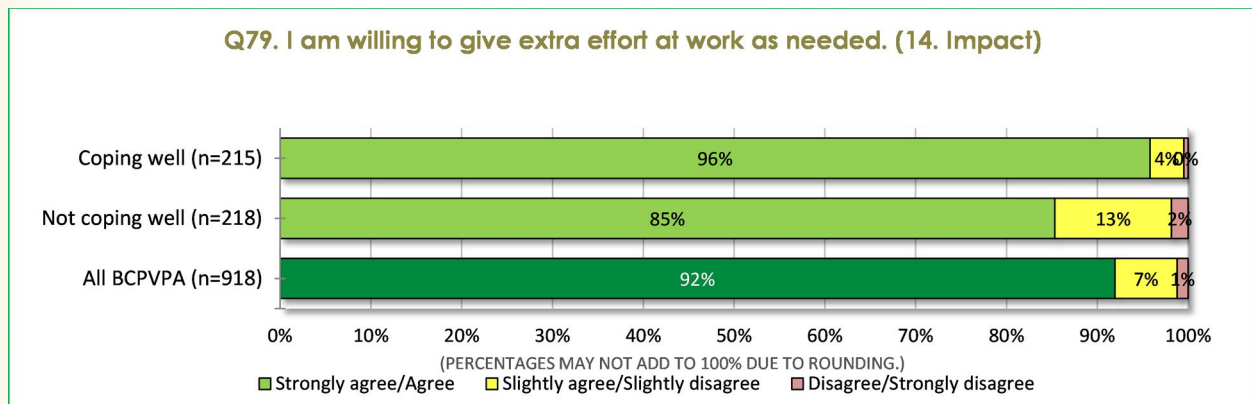


Our external survey and research partner guiding us in this research noted that they have seen other occupations with a similar pattern in survey data sets, a group with a level of commitment to others, and one that may put their own health and well-being at risk: first responders.

A DUALITY OF RESPONSE

The two questions that follow have what seems to be a contradictory finding.





Of the total survey respondent population, 50% of respondents felt overwhelmed by the complexity of work, 35% are in the “I’m Fine” zone, and only 16% are not feeling overwhelmed.

However, despite the impact of the volume and complexity of their work, an overwhelming majority of Principals and Vice-Principals still want to give that extra effort as needed.

MINING THE INSIGHTS

To effectively mine the insights of our data, with the help of Verita HR and their statistician, Adam Hunter, we separated the ‘health’ questions from the ‘commitment’ questions in the “Thrive” section of the survey, to get a ‘coping’ score per respondent. We then reduced the dampening impact of the “I’m fine” group by isolating the top 200 ‘coping well’ respondents and the bottom 200 ‘not coping well’ respondents – which equals about 40% of our survey population. And – bam! – the results were there. This applied method of data mining shed the light needed to reveal the impact that workplace factors can have on member well-being!

The findings, and solutions, for our population are not linear; they are complex. However, a lens of psychological safety brings light to guide us in the necessary direction.

UNPACKING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is becoming an ongoing narrative in leading workplaces. In the United States, organizational behaviour expert and researcher Dr. Amy Edmonson published the type of environmental work factors that promoted psychologically safe teams. In reviewing the findings from the Thriving in Education survey, and in consideration of Edmonson’s model, we can illustrate the difference between a safe and unsafe workplace.

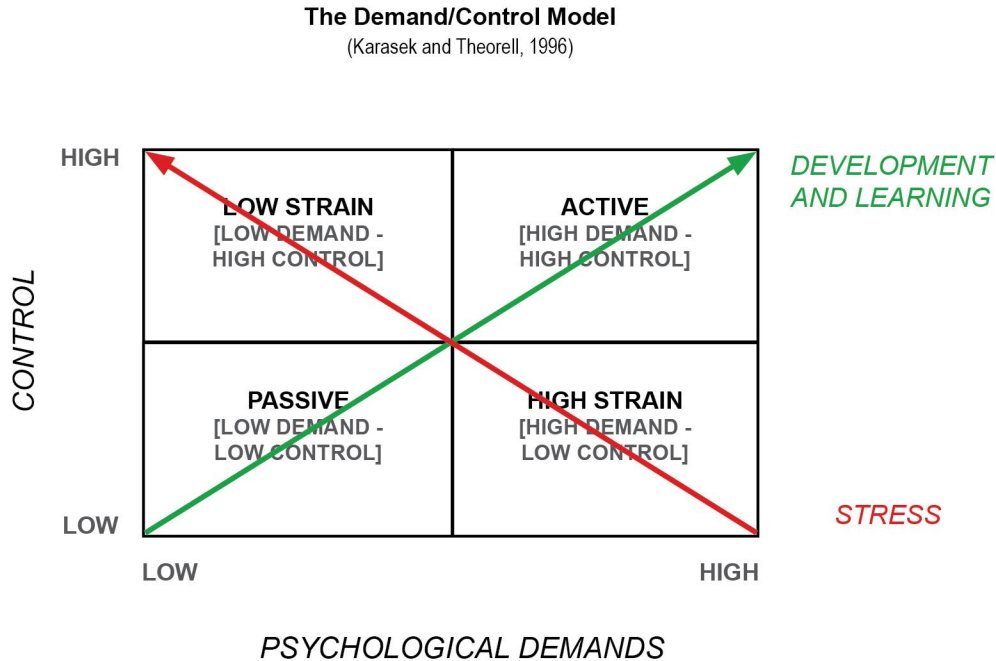
ENVIRONNMENTS HIGH IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Input and contribution is encouraged from all team members
- Respect and appreciation
- Active listening and learning from each other is valued
- Freedom from chronic hostility and anger
- Members can speak candidly with ideas, questions, concerns, even mistakes
- No retaliation for speaking up
- Leverages the benefits of diversity, belonging

ENVIRONNMENTS LOW IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Members fear to speak up or question
- Favourites and/or regular "go to's" for ideas and information
- Dismissive, or exclusion
- Discrimination or unconscious bias
- Leaders who 'know it all' and do not acknowledge gaps
- Passivity or aggression
- Not feeling valued

This brought to mind the Demand/Control Model seen here, and how having high demand and complex jobs – where an individual has limited control – leads to a high stress and high psychological risk environment:



This Model reflected the experience of our member respondents, particularly this challenging past year, as demonstrated by their open comments in the survey.

In 2013, Canada became the first nation in the world to launch the National Standards in Psychological Health and Safety, a voluntary management system framework that promotes continuous improvement of the psychological health and safety of employees with a similar intent to that of occupational health and safety systems for physical injuries. From this work, thirteen risk factors were identified:

- Engagement
- Growth and Development
- Psychological Support
- Organizational Culture
- Clear Leadership and Expectations
- Civility and Respect
- Involvement and Influence
- Workload Management
- Balance
- Psychological Protection
- Protection of Physical Safety
- Psychological Competencies
- Recognition and Rewards

Many of these risk factors parallel those measured in employee engagement surveys, and these are the factors we explored in our survey. As noted earlier, the responses to these risk factors were compared to the coping responses of Principals and Vice-Principals to understand which workplace factors may be having the greatest influence on their health.

MOST NOTABLE WORKPLACE FACTORS

We identified the most notable workplace factors by determining which of the 13 risk factors illustrated the greatest difference in responses between the 'coping well' and the 'not coping well' groups. We also thoroughly combed through more than 4,000 open comments and identified themes that further solidified our findings.

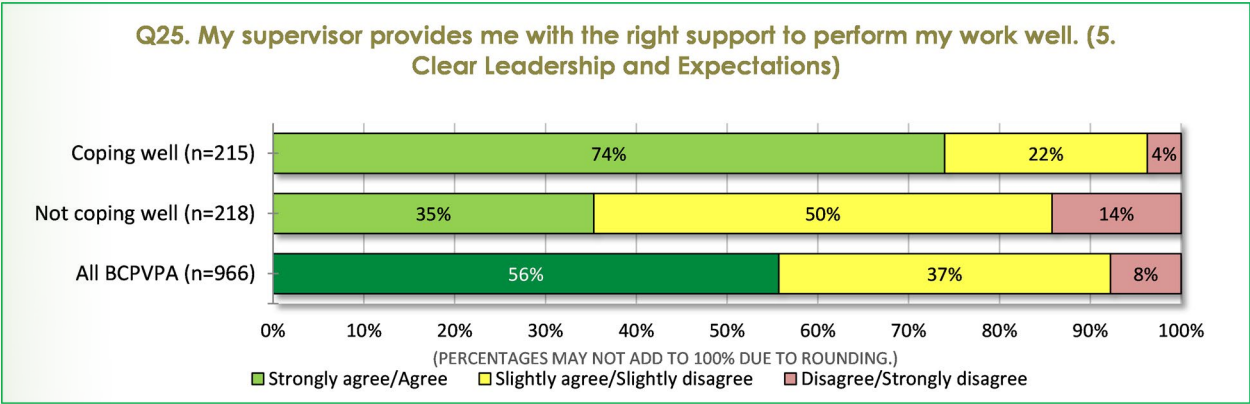
The top notable workplace risk factors associated with both positive and challenged levels of coping are:

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

CLEAR LEADERSHIP AND EXPECTATIONS

My previous work with engagement surveys, particularly those that aligned measures of health and/or absence, have repeatedly shown statistical significance as it relates to the relationship between the employee and their direct manager. The better the relationship with their manager, the better the coping, and the lower the absence rate.

So, it is not surprising that this risk factor tops our list. The survey responses to the questions in this section demonstrate a distinct difference in responses between the 'coping well' and 'not coping well' groups. For example:

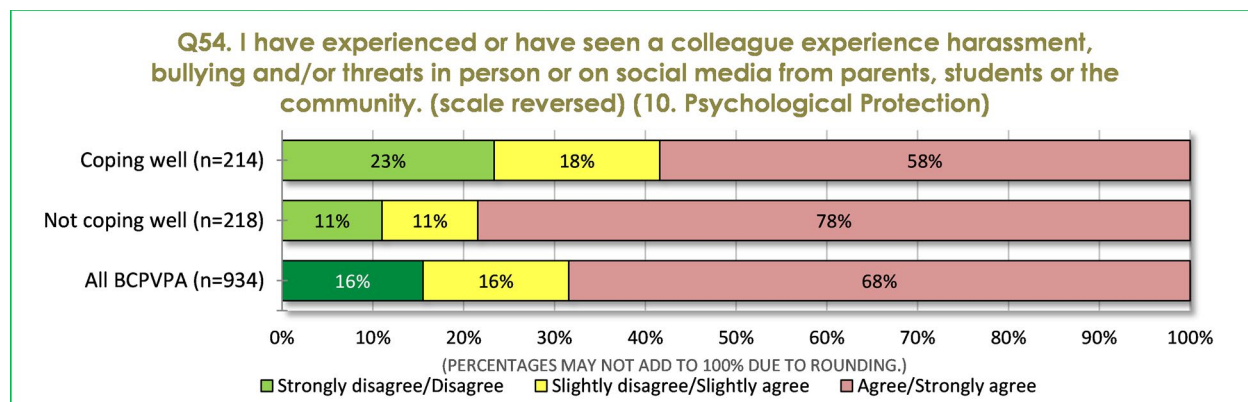


This diagram reveals that almost 75% of Principals and Vice-Principals who are 'coping well', agree, or strongly agree that their supervisor provides the right support to perform their work well. This is compared to only 35% of those 'not coping well'.

CIVILITY AND RESPECT

There were concerning comments about the degree of civility and respect experienced by many respondents, and the challenging workplace behaviours that Principals and Vice-Principals can face daily.

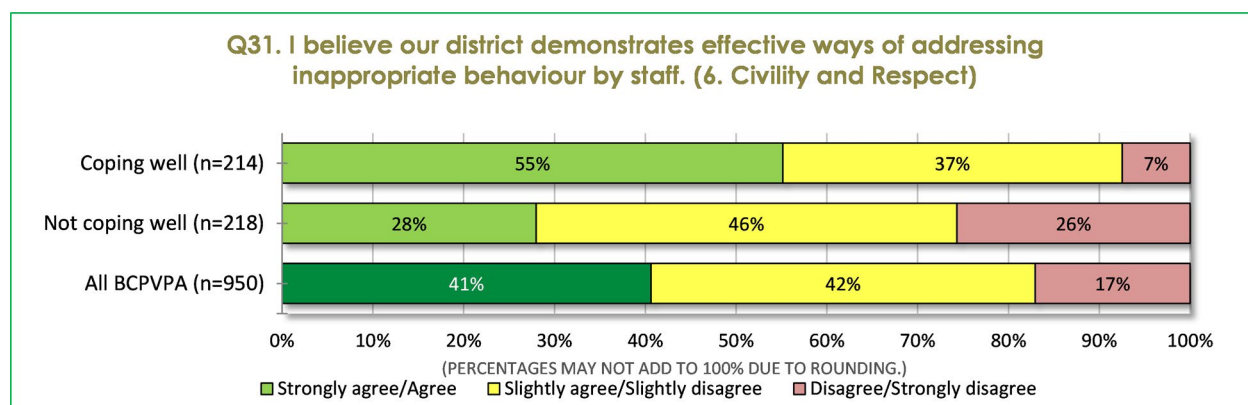
One of the more alarming findings from our study – both for respondents who are 'coping well' or 'not coping well' – related to the factor of psychological protection:



**Please note that the scale here is reversed: the red bars represent those who agree/strongly agree with the statement*

How this factor unfolds when focusing on Civility and Respect is in how these situations are addressed, and the resulting level of psychological safety felt by the individual.

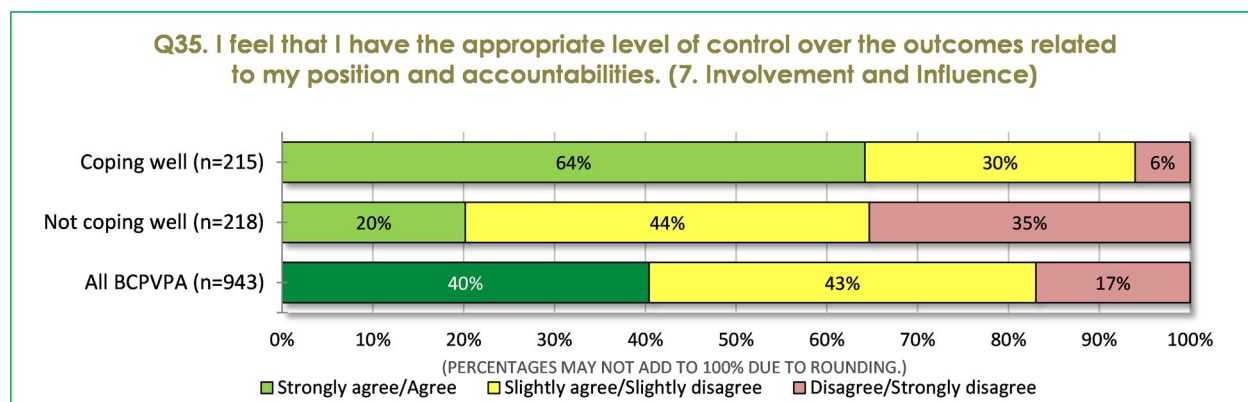
In considering the chart below, the overall score of 41 percent agreeing across all survey respondents is not a resounding finding on its own. However, the significant difference between those 'coping well' and 'not coping well' is demonstrated not only in the green and affirmative zone, but particularly in the red zone. More than one in four Principals and Vice-Principals are 'not coping well', and disagree or strongly disagree that their district deals effectively with inappropriate staff behaviour.



INVOLVEMENT AND INFLUENCE

This psychological risk factor is a significant factor relating Principals' and Vice-Principals' coping ability.

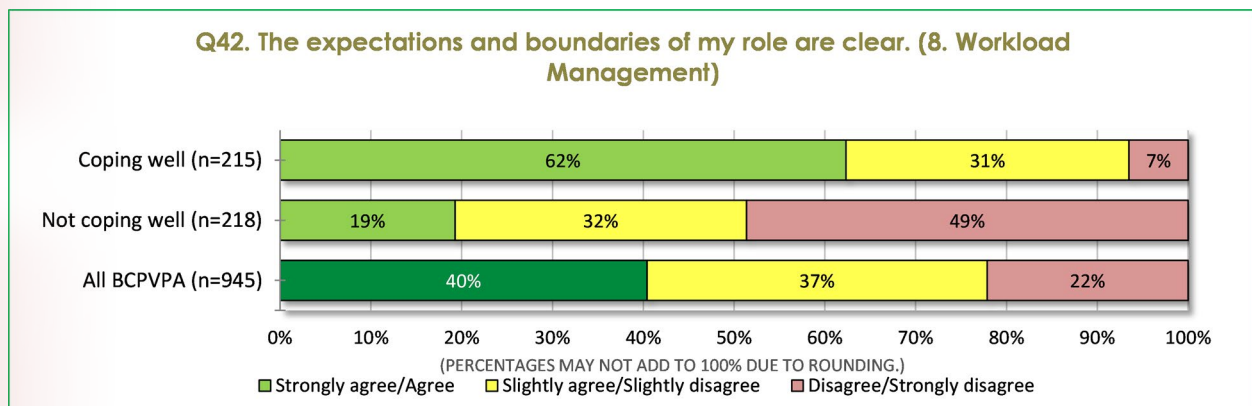
In the diagram below, more than one in three of the 'not coping well' respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they have the appropriate level of control over the outcomes related to their work. This is a significant finding when you consider that 64% of those 'coping well' agree to strongly agree that they have the appropriate level of control; only 6% feel they do not.



WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT AND BALANCE

Principals and Vice-Principals, 'coping well' or 'not coping well', or somewhere in between, have busy and complex jobs that they love. Workload has steadily increased the past few years, and intensified during the pandemic, with the work buckets of our members spilling over into their personal lives.

In the diagram below, the 62% 'coping well' agree that their expectations and boundaries are clear. That is in contrast to a whopping 50% of those 'not coping well' who disagree with this statement. These individuals may be working in very ambiguous environments where the clarity between their responsibility and the responsibilities of others is gray, or perhaps non-existent.

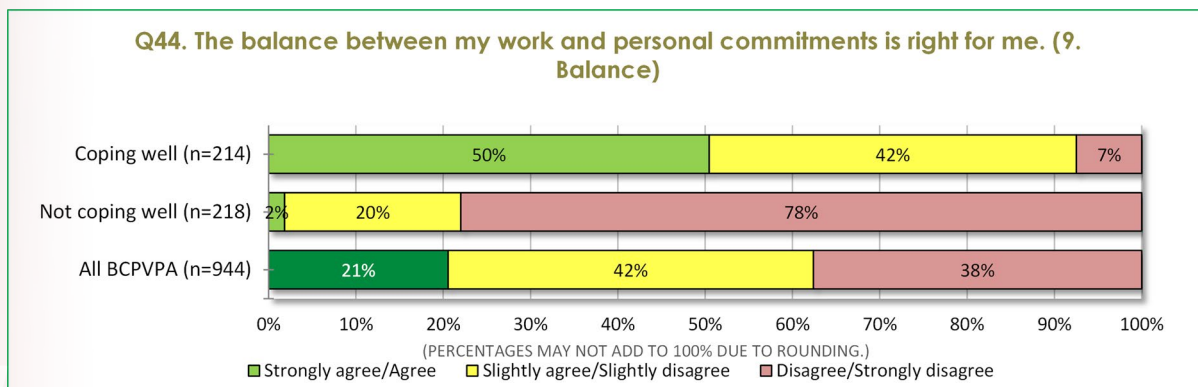


In the open question section of the survey, there is a question: *What are one or two things in your working environment or working relationships that you find negatively impact your health and/or success in your role?*

The most frequent response theme was one of work volume, unrealistic expectations, and competing priorities. This reality can lead to an intrusion of the Principal's or Vice-Principal's job into their home life, exercise schedule, community commitments, and – importantly – their rest.

In the diagram below, on the third bar which represents the responses of all survey participants, it becomes evident that this is a significant issue. Of the total respondents, only one in five felt the balance worked for them – almost 40% disagreed.

The story becomes more serious when we look at who is coping and who is not. For those 'not coping well', nearly 80% **disagree or strongly disagree** that their balance is right for them.



It does not take a PhD in neurology to grasp that this type of workload and life imbalance can have a significant effect on the nervous systems and mental health of Principals and Vice-Principals. The ideal situation would be to reduce this load, which may or may not be feasible. Alternatively, we can help Principals and Vice-Principals to develop

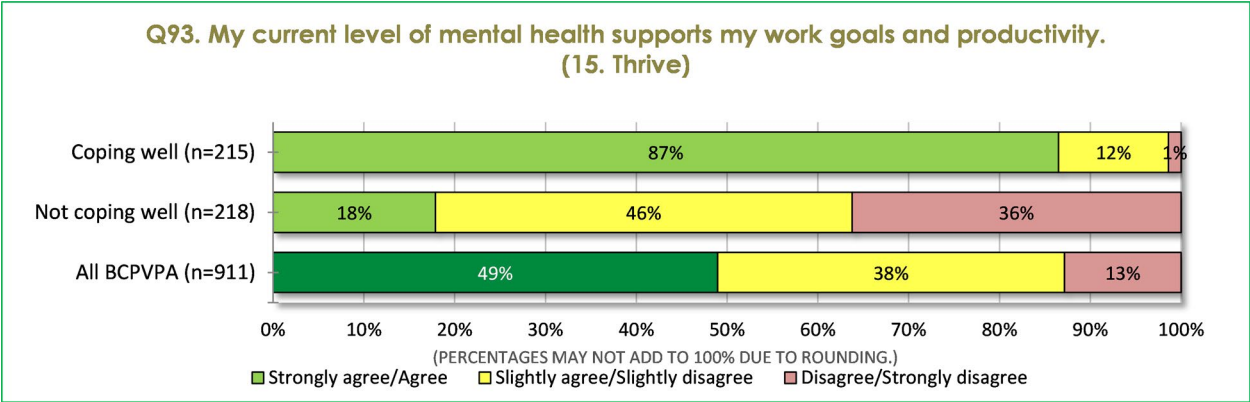
stronger coping skills, enhance their resilience, and put a focus on finding ways to influence and support the workplace factors that enhance our population’s ability to thrive.

THRIVING LEADERS

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.

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE INDIVIDUAL

In this finding, the “I’m Fines” in the ‘not coping well’ group is almost 50%. But even in the overall respondent population, the “I’m Fines” are a significant 38%. Just under 50% of all respondents agree that their mental health supports their work goals and productivity.



Intervention and resources are necessary, albeit different, for members 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.

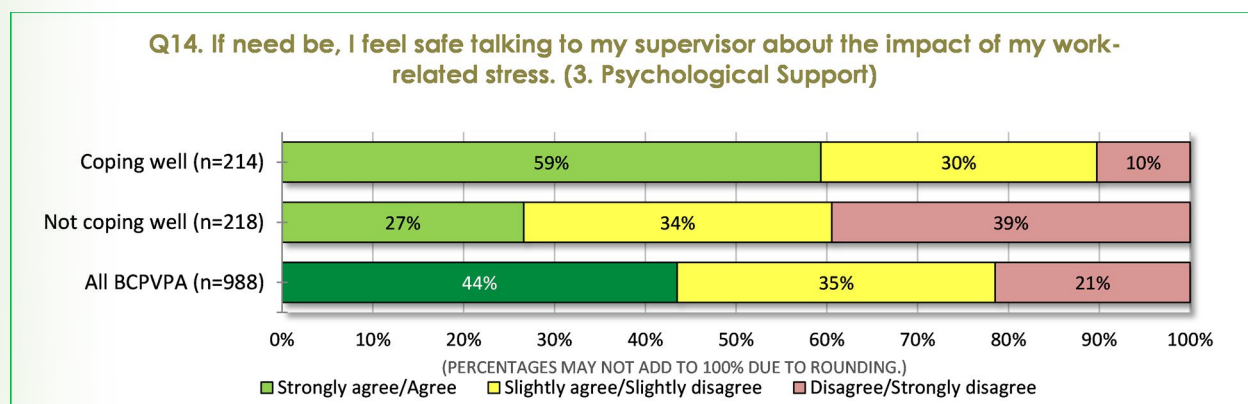
The uniqueness of our population brings distinct challenges in enhancing the green zone. The ‘overcommitment’ and Type A personality of this population can be a tough mindset to mold, as their core values and beliefs are what make Principals and Vice-Principals strong leaders. And, while a deep sense 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?

The answers lie in self-awareness, moving forward with intent, and the skills to support that growth. In the March 2022 Princip(ed) magazine, we will take a deep dive into how to set boundaries, be assertive in expressing needs, and boost individual coping skills.

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE SYSTEM

Make no mistake, enhancing the individual coping and resiliency foundation helps to a certain degree. However, it is important to note that this foundation does have its limits based on the size, volume, and frequency of those waves in the ‘ocean’ of the workplace as, over time, even the strongest of foundations will falter.

This is where the tenets of psychological safety apply. The diagram below shows that a key place to start can be in creating safe environments and relationships that significantly increase the percentage – currently 44% -- of those who feel safe talking to their managers about the impact of work-related stress. When a Principal or Vice-Principal is struggling, it is imperative for open dialogue to happen in a safe, compassionate environment so that adjustments can be made to support the individual’s path to health, and to boost the positive impact of that individual on the school environment.



One of the open-ended questions in the survey asked respondents about one thing the workplace is already doing well or could enhance to support their overall well-being and job success.

The top themes from the comments were:

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

While enhancing administration time and increasing staff are solutions requiring enhanced resources, the other themes revolve around the relationships between school leaders, leadership skills, caring, and engagement.

The identification of the workplace factors that enhance thriving is learning that the BCPVPA is bringing to our own members, the Ministry of Education, and partner associations in the sector. These factors translate into workplace actions that are intended to calm the waves and allow Principals and Vice-Principals to manage the up and downs of the tide from a safe, valued, and involved position. From this survey, we believe the key areas to consider are shown in the diagram below.



The March 2022 issue of Principled will continue to explore the recommendations for enhancing psychological safety in the workplace and enabling our members to thrive. We will keep our members updated on our discussions with stakeholders, and any initiatives that are being implemented based on the survey findings.

ON THE HORIZON

In a manner similar to last year, the 2021-2022 school year started off with fog on the horizon, and uncertainty about how the second school year in a pandemic would proceed. And there we find our members, the lighthouses in their schools and districts, continuing to provide that sense of stability and safety.

Know this. The BCPVPA is here to:

- Be the lighthouse for our members, and a safe haven when you experience storms
- Bring together colleagues to connect and support one another
- Provide resources and education to help enhance our members' health
- Advocate for workplaces that are psychologically safe and compassionate, to allow not only Principals and Vice-Principals, but also the 500,000 students, 50,000 teachers, 34,000 support staff, countless families, and community volunteers, to thrive in BC's education system.



Thank you to all of our members for your participation -- your candour and vulnerability contributed so much to the Thriving in Education findings.

If you are a BCPVPA member with concerns about your health and well-being, we are here to help.

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All survey data cited in this article: BCPVPA Thriving in Education Member Survey, 2021, Verita Strategy Group Inc.