



Developing

OUR

*THE ROLE OF
INTENTIONAL
DIALOGUE*

Leadership
Identities

by

Dr. Lucinda Wolters

Principal

SD 71 (Comox Valley)

A LEADERSHIP AWAKENING

There was a time early in my leadership journey, as the lone administrator of a small rural school, when I realized something was missing in how I was engaging teachers. On paper, everything was running smoothly: tasks were completed, timelines were met, information was relayed, procedures were followed. But in staff meetings, the energy was flat, and the communication patterns were stagnant. There was a lack of engagement, curiosity, or shared ownership. Educator agency did not appear to be present, and collective meaning-making about our students and their needs was pretty much absent. The focus on the status quo was, frankly, boring!

As the person facilitating some of these meetings, I did most of the talking. The communication direction was predominantly one-way or two-way, and not multi-directional. I noted a similar pattern and feeling in district meetings. I recognized that meeting facilitation tended to be from a traditional approach that I had experienced in classrooms growing up. You know, the “sage on the stage” teaching style? Increasingly, it became apparent to me that the way adult meetings were structured in our schools and systems wasn’t just mirroring this telling approach – it was actively reinforcing it! Meetings were quietly normalizing passive participation and limiting the possibility for authentic connection and shared leadership development. And I was contributing to this unhelpful pattern in my role at the school level.

FROM TELLING TO ENGAGING

This awareness lingered, and it set me on a path to explore a different way of leading, one that focuses not just on what we do and what needs to get done, but on developing a **sense of being** and **who we are** from a clear – yet multi-layered and evolving – individual and collective leadership identity. This kind of approach prompts an on-going narrative of rich engagement that involves not only the quest to understand oneself, but to see and seek to understand others, their worldviews and experiences, and to influence leadership development.

Such an understanding of self and others can create space for powerful emergence through the ongoing interplay and exchange between people within place-based contexts. It invites people in their setting to ask, “Who are we? Why are we doing this? Why are we doing it this way?” (Garmston & Wellman, 2016). Rather than centering procedures and routines, it is the *meaning-making* and the *ritualization* of shared

experience that becomes the fuel for authentic engagement and leadership identity.

LEADING FROM IDENTITY, NOT JUST ACTION



Embracing identity-centered leadership reminds us that leadership is not just about what we do, but about who we are in relation to others.

The introduction of our new BCPVPA Leadership Competencies highlights the central role of *identity*, a concept also deeply rooted in the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Embedded within these competencies is an awareness of “*being in the canoe*,” that includes a commitment to relational leadership grounded in collaboration and shared responsibility with both district leaders and teachers. Framed through the lens of *leadership identity*, the Competencies invite us to deepen our understanding of *equity* and, I believe, encourage us to thoughtfully unpack and reflect on how our social identities – race, gender, sexual orientation, age, spirituality/religion, ability – inform our leadership identities.

A critical truth tends to be overlooked in leadership: who we are, how we relate to and with others, our values, beliefs, and worldviews, fundamentally shape how we lead and how we include others in diverse and dynamic educational contexts. Moreover, I suggest that typical, traditional colonial approaches to meetings miss the mark for engaging all voices or identities in the room. Furthermore, if we truly endeavour to liberate our education systems for **all** learners, we must start with who we are and relentlessly explore in psychologically safe spaces what our leadership identities mean in relation to diverse others. Our leadership identities are certainly not “one and done”.

"Meetings were quietly normalizing passive participation and limiting the possibility for authentic connection and shared leadership development."

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY LEARNING: THE ADAPTIVE SCHOOLS FOUNDATION SEMINAR

• — — — — — •

A pivotal learning experience which led me to examine more closely the meaning and relevance of leadership identity in my role as a Principal occurred when I attended the four-day Adaptive Schools Foundation Seminar, offered through the organization Thinking Collaborative. Through Adaptive Schools learning, I was introduced to Robert Dilts' model of *Nested Levels of Learning*, illuminating for me the priority to see myself and our systems in relation to leadership identity in order to be more effective in today's complex learning environments.

Dilts' model outlines the different levels at which learning, change, and development can occur within individuals or organizations. These levels are typically represented hierarchically, without suggesting a strict top-down influence, but to highlight how higher levels often shape and give meaning to those below. The levels move from the more concrete to the more abstract: environment (where and when we act), behaviours (what we do), capabilities (how we do it), beliefs and values (why we do it), and finally, identity (who we believe we are). While each level can influence and be influenced by the others, shifts at the higher levels – particularly at the identity level – tend to be seen as creating deeper, more sustainable transformation. However, because they are more abstract, these levels also require greater intentionality and reflection to access and influence.



*ROBERT DILTS' MODEL OF
NESTED LEVELS OF LEARNING*

"When we pause for intentional dialogue, we lay the foundation for a more authentic, collective identity to emerge."



UNPACKING COLONIAL PATTERNS

• — — — — — •

What I have come to notice in education is that we tend to prioritize the lower levels of Dilts' model – **environment** and **behaviour** – most likely because these elements are easiest to influence even though the impact is less profound. The traditional emphasis contributes to the procedural focus and "telling" style in meetings, as previously mentioned. More precisely, we may be inclined to focus on external expectations and observable actions, then hope that this will somehow lead to deep, transformative change. We might see such a tendency when we overemphasize information-heavy meetings, specify checklists, create prescriptive plans, and provide manuals, flowcharts, and role descriptions, but remain anchored at the behavioral level.

Quite predictably, we might surmise that we will remain entrenched in these more colonial approaches. And while these tools and structures have their place – that is, they *are* necessary – they are far from sufficient. They alone cannot generate the kind of change we seek, especially when it comes to making a resonant impact for our priority learners. When we do not explore leadership identity *within* these routines, we are doomed to repeat them.

Is it any wonder that our schools really haven't changed that much in the last fifty years, with our extreme focus on the lower levels of Dilts' model? Given the increasing complexity of our world, there is no time like the present to come from a place of understanding who we are, as individuals and collectively, for our students and their future. So, in

practical terms, how do we go about prioritizing the other levels – such as our identity – and what does this mean for meetings?

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP IDENTITY THROUGH DIALOGUE

• — — — — — — — •

One of my favourite quotes, shared by a deeply respected mentor and Adaptive Schools trainer Carolyn McKanders, is, “The quality of the adult conversations directly relates to the quality of the work that gets done for kids.” This quote draws attention to the profound impact of both how we talk, and what we talk about. When considering leadership identity, to focus on the higher levels of Dilts’ model, we must engage in richer, more multidirectional dialogue. These kinds of conversations allow us to clarify and express not only our thoughts and feelings, but also our values and beliefs. They create space for mutual influence and shared understanding and lead to decisions that build collective ownership and commitment.

When we pause for intentional dialogue, we lay the foundation for a more authentic, collective identity to emerge. Simply put, if we continually limit our conversations to the same voices and focus primarily on tasks and information, we also limit our growth. In doing so, we risk stalling the development of our leadership identities and, more critically, perpetuating systems that continue to leave priority learners behind. Developing leadership identities through intentional dialogue is never a waste of time.

SOURCES & RESOURCES

Garmston, R., & Wellman, B.,
The Adaptive Schools Sourcebook (2016)

Thinking Collaborative:
www.thinkingcollaborative.com/aboutas

Read "The Best
Leaders Encourage
'Spacious Thinking'"
by Megan Reitz &
John Higgins



Dr. Lucinda Wolters is a Principal for Comox Valley Schools at Huband Park Elementary. She is also a Training Associate for Thinking Collaborative and facilitates the Adaptive Schools Foundation Seminar. In her dissertation, she explored "The Influence of Adaptive Schools Training on the Development of Principals' Leadership Identity," (2022), with clear and positive results. smallfires.ca

bcpvpa
TELL A FRIEND!

BCPVPA Members: do you have a colleague who has not yet joined our Association? Help them to be part of our community of leaders, and to get access to employment relationship support, professional learning and development, committee opportunities, and much more.

bcpvpa.org/membership/application

