

by

Scott Robinson

Executive Director, BCPVPA

Identity and Leadership

Navigating Selfhood as a New School Leader

In the mid-1990s, I was an early-career elementary school teacher in a deeply conservative part of the province. I was also a deeply closeted gay man. Since adolescence, I had worked hard to ensure that no one — not my family, not close friends, and certainly not my employer — would ever suspect or discover this aspect of my personal identity. I was convinced that if anyone in my district found out, I would be fired, and my teaching career would end.

During those years, I poured myself equally into two efforts: creating engaging, purposeful learning experiences for my students, and concealing the parts of my personal identity I believed others would judge harshly were they to discover them. I remember once encountering my Principal at a weekend real estate open house. I panicked and left immediately, terrified because I was there with my same-sex partner. For days, I worried my Principal had seen us and that my employment would be in jeopardy.

Ten years later, as a still closeted middle school Principal, I experienced another moment of panic when I opened my front door on Halloween to find three of my students standing on the porch. Their eyes drifted past me to the man standing behind me — my partner. Again, I braced myself for rumours, gossip, and the possibility of professional fallout.

Fast-forward another decade, and I found myself walking in the Vancouver Pride Parade as the first openly gay Superintendent of Schools of the Vancouver School District. While the experience continued to be personally uncomfortable after years of holding that truth, it also signalled a change both in my own perspective and in how some people's beliefs about diversity had begun to shift. As I walked, I reflected not only on how far I had come, but also on how much society had shifted since my first years as a teacher.

Those twenty years marked a journey of personal and societal evolution. Along the way, I met many others from marginalized communities — staff, students, and parents — who were also concealing aspects of themselves they feared would bring judgment or exclusion. Some felt shame. Others believed their identities would prevent them from ever being given an opportunity to lead. Gradually, I began to feel a responsibility, especially to students, to show that people like us could indeed be accepted, and that being a school and district leader does not require hiding who we are.

For many Principals and Vice-Principals, the first years in the role often feel like stepping into an entirely new landscape. The pace is relentless, the responsibilities are heavy, and the shift from teacher to school leader requires a profound transformation in how one understands both their professional and personal identity. For those who carry an identity that has historically been marginalized — whether based on ethnicity, sexual or gender identity, or physical or non-visible disability — this transition brings added layers of complexity and potential vulnerability.

At the heart of this challenge lies a deeply personal question: *How much of myself should I reveal as I step into leadership?* The answer is not simple. It involves balancing authenticity with self-protection, representation with vulnerability, and leadership presence with personal safety.

Leadership is not just a set of skills; it is an expression of self. A Principal or Vice-Principal does not shed their identity when they step into the office each morning.

Their ethnic background, gender expression, sexual identity, or lived experiences with disability, among other characteristics, inform not only how they see the world but also how they are seen by others.

For many new Principals and Vice-Principals, the transition into school leadership can intensify awareness of identity. As teachers, many may have felt freer to express elements of who they are in classrooms or among colleagues. Moving into a formal leadership role often brings heightened scrutiny: from staff, from families, from the wider community. Suddenly, aspects of personal identity may feel like risks that could influence credibility, trust, or career trajectory.

Yet identity is also a profound strength. Leaders who understand who they are bring authenticity, empathy, and courage into their work. The challenge lies in discerning when and how to share elements of self in ways that enhance leadership rather than diminish feelings of personal safety.

For Principals and Vice-Principals who belong to identity groups that are subject to bias or discrimination, disclosure can feel fraught. A leader who identifies as LGBTQ2S+, for example, may wrestle with whether to be open about their partner in community conversations. A leader who is Indigenous, Black, or from another racialized community may feel pressure to minimize or hide cultural practices to fit into dominant norms. A leader with a disability may wonder whether to disclose an accommodation need, fearing that doing so might undermine perceptions of competence.

For those new to role, these tensions are often amplified by inexperience and uncertainty. The stakes feel higher: credibility has not yet been firmly established, and the path to advancement still seems precarious. At the same time, silence can be costly. Hiding or fragmenting identity requires emotional labour and can erode resilience, authenticity, and relational trust with colleagues.

When Principals and Vice-Principals bring their full selves into leadership — carefully, intentionally, and

safely — the impact can be transformative. Students who see leaders who share aspects of their identity experience a sense of belonging and possibility. Families feel affirmed when leadership reflects the diversity of the community. Staff benefit from working in schools where difference is not only acknowledged but valued.

Representation matters deeply in education. A student who sees a Principal acknowledging and celebrating their Indigenous identity, using a wheelchair, or openly identifying as queer receives a subtle but powerful message: *There is a place for me in leadership, in community, and in the future.*

With all that being said, for new-to-role leaders, finding the balance between self-disclosure and self-protection requires both reflection and strategy. Some guiding considerations might include:

1. **Context Matters.** Not every environment is equally safe or supportive. Leaders must read their school and community culture carefully before disclosing personal details.
2. **Gradual Disclosure.** Sharing elements of identity can be done incrementally, starting

with trusted colleagues or allies before moving into broader circles.

3. **Building Support Networks.** Having mentors, affinity groups, or professional associations provides a space for leaders to process experiences and gain perspective.

Importantly, self-protection is not weakness. It is wisdom. New Principals and Vice-Principals should know that they can both safeguard their personal well-being and still lead with courage and authenticity.

Leadership development is often framed in terms of competencies, strategies, and technical skills. Yet for many Principals and Vice-Principals, professional growth is inseparable from personal identity. Navigating who they are — and how that identity is perceived — shapes resilience, decision-making, and leadership presence.

A leader who has experienced marginalization may bring heightened empathy to students who struggle on the margins of school life. A leader who has wrestled with identity disclosure may become an advocate for safer and more inclusive spaces. These experiences enrich leadership, adding depth and



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authenticity that cannot be learned in workshops or policy manuals.

It is important to note that representation should never rest solely on the shoulders of the individual leader. Systems must provide the structures of support and protection that allow Principals and Vice-Principals, and leaders at all levels, to lead authentically without undue risk. The ongoing work of integrating identity with leadership requires support. District leaders, mentors, and colleagues must create conditions where Principals and Vice-Principals can explore these questions openly.

District leaders, in particular, play a pivotal role in supporting new Principals and Vice-Principals as they navigate identity in leadership. This may include:

1. **Creating Safe Opportunities for Conversation.** It is helpful when district supervisors signal that it is safe to engage in identity-related discussions without judgment or risk to career progression.
2. **Providing Mentorship.** Structured opportunities for identity-based mentorship

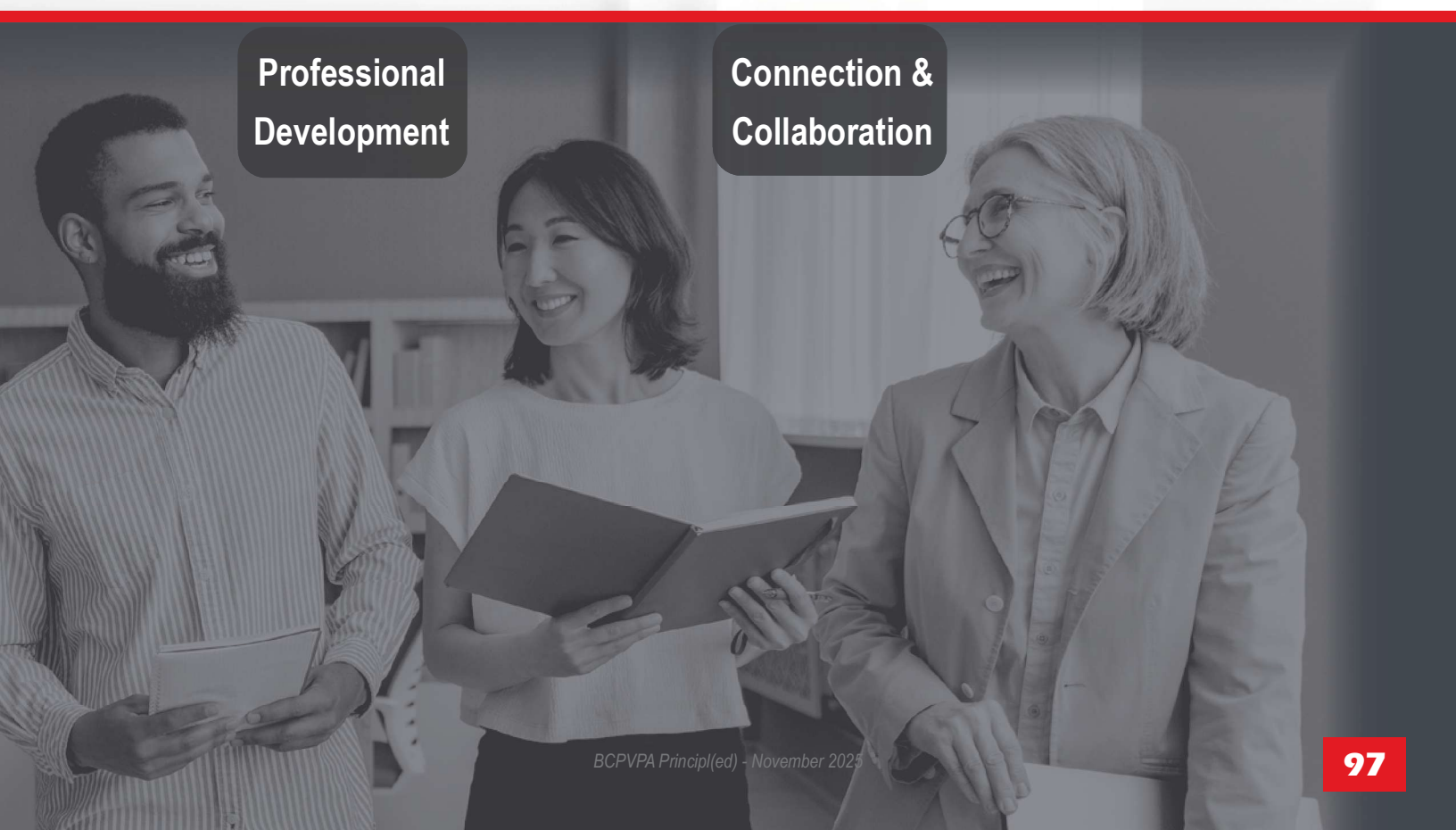
or professional networks can normalize and support disclosure decisions.

3. **Modeling Inclusivity.** District leaders who openly value diversity send a clear message that identity is not a liability but a strength in leadership.

When districts intentionally create these supports, new leaders can step into their roles with greater confidence, clarity, and authenticity.

For new-to-role Principals and Vice-Principals, identity is not an optional layer that sits on top of leadership; it is the foundation upon which leadership is built. Navigating the tension between authenticity and safety, disclosure and protection, is part of the developmental journey for many school leaders who belong to historically marginalized groups.

While the challenges are real, the rewards can be profound. We must all ensure that identity is not seen as a barrier, but as a source of strength. When Principals and Vice-Principals can safely bring their authentic selves into leadership, they embody a powerful message for students, families, colleagues, and the community: *Leadership is for all of us.*



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