

INTENTIONALLY GROWING LEADERS

two perspectives

by
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How many of you keep a pair of rainboots in your office?

And if you do keep a pair of rainboots, which policy manual or administrative procedure suggested this? Did your graduate program prepare you for recess supervision? Probably not.

The Coquitlam School District created a leadership framework to support its strategic plan, Directions 2025. Specifically, Strategic Goal #3 which focuses on Organizational Capacity to ensure that human, financial, and physical resources are sustainable. The leadership framework had four dimensions: Ethical Leaders, Relationship Builders, System Leaders, and Leaders for Learning. Our district wanted to support leadership development and sustainability through an in-house professional learning series that would be complemented by the support provided by the Coquitlam Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association and the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association. The district leadership team created a **Mindful Leadership** program that had two series, one to support teacher leaders called **Building Leadership Capacity**, and the second to support practicing Principals and Vice-Principals called **Intentionally Growing Leaders (IGL)**. We were asked to support the IGL series with six virtual meetings that supported fourteen administrators new to their role.

Before we go further, let us introduce the facilitators for this IGL series. Craig Mah started his administrative career in 2004, and Leanne Kemp started in 2019. Both Leanne and Craig worked at two different schools. In 2007-2010, we worked together at Coquitlam River Elementary. Craig was Principal, and Leanne was the department head. In 2018, we worked together at Walton Elementary as an administrative team when Leanne joined as Vice-Principal. How could our different years of experience help shape a mentorship program that

would be meaningful to the participants?

What topics should we cover? We considered broad ideas – such as building positive relationships – but also more pragmatic elements of leadership that are not found in any educational leadership program or district procedure. We considered practices that could only be learned through experience. The question of what items we kept in our office to support our daily work was part of one IGL session. We also uncovered other topics that future mentorship programs should consider. We reminded ourselves to always connect our topics with the leadership framework.

Our first planning meeting went something like this:

Craig: *So, what topics should we cover? Definitely positive relationships.*

Leanne: *Yeah, relationships.*

Craig: *Ok. What else?*

Leanne: *For me, where do I find stuff?*

Craig: *Like paper?*

Leanne: *No, I don't mean paper. I just think back to when I started, I didn't know how to find stuff. Like who do I call in Finance? How do I put a work order in? It's finding all that stuff that takes up time.*

Craig: *Good point. Let's cover that.*

We agreed on two books that would serve as an anchor for our conversation with the group. *Transforming School Cultures* by Anthony Muhammad and *Learning by Doing* (Canadian Edition) by Rick Dufour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos. Both books offered big ideas, but also practical approaches to working with staff to build a learning culture.

“WHAT TOPICS SHOULD WE COVER FOR NEW ADMINISTRATORS?”

Leanne's Perspective

Relationships, relationships, relationships. Craig and I talked a lot about this when I first started in administration. Craig had recommended Anthony Muhammad's book, and I quickly read it cover to cover. This is such an important topic and the two books we chose provided an interesting perspective on looking at how a staff functions together, and how the different personalities mesh. Another question I had when I started was how do I help staff to grow and move forward? *Learning by Doing* fit well with Anthony's book, as it delves into how to move a staff forward. In our role as administrators, having difficult conversations was another topic I knew was important but I did not have a lot of experience with, or training in, this area. This topic was covered in both books in different ways, and I felt it was very useful to include in one of our sessions.

But then, what else? One topic that was important for me was to look at the things that I had no idea were so important to keep in my office. This includes having a screwdriver to fix things, boots and gloves for those days when the snow starts to

fall and you need to quickly help shovel and salt, or the importance of always having an extra pair of shoes. No one told me about these little items that made life a lot easier when I had them in my office.

Alongside difficult conversations, leading staff through growth, and building relationships, I also felt that understanding a budget was important. Where do I find the information on this, and how do I know how to keep things on track as the year progresses?

There are so many things that you learn on the fly, but so many of these things could be shared with new administrators; that was the hope with these sessions. How do we give them information to help build their capacity as efficient leaders in the day-to-day, while also learning and growing into the leadership style that works for them?

This is where the idea of a survey came from. We felt this would help determine the most useful areas of focus for the participants.

Craig's Perspective

Prior to the start of the IGL series, Leanne sent a survey to the group to ask for their content ideas. We had a variety of participants from different levels, and with different experiences. The results of the survey let us know that we were on the right track with our planning, and enabled us to schedule sessions and guest speakers in the areas that had the most interest.

I wanted to touch on topics that may not be as apparent to school leaders, but still have relevance to their daily work. We also recognized that there is no instruction manual or guidebook on how to run a learning community. It was important to provide resources for the participants to help support their work with their schools and build a collaborative learning community.

Relationships, Hopes and Fears, Gratitude

Our introductory session was focused on developing positive relationships with all staff members. We reviewed the big ideas in *Transforming School Cultures* and then asked the participants to describe the cultural landscape at their schools. Our guiding questions were:

What are your observations of the relationships at your school?

Can you make connections with Muhammad's ideas?

How do you envision yourself developing relationships with the school community?

At the end of the session, we asked the participants to share gratitude for an idea they heard that resonated with them.



SESSION 2:

Difficult Conversations, Managing Conflict, and School Growth Plans

Leanne and I shared difficult conversations that we had in the past, and referenced a difficult conversation that was shared in the book. The participants went into smaller breakout rooms to share stories of how they navigated conversations. We then asked the participants to describe how they are leading the school growth plans. What has been the process of figuring out your school plan? How are staff involved in developing school plans? What might you do to help move your school forward? How are you making your plans authentic for your staff, students, and parents?

SESSION 3:

Where to Find Stuff: Finance

We invited the Finance department to present the best practices that all Principals should be following when managing their school budgets. We planned a 20-minute presentation, but the follow-up questions from the participants took us into overtime.

SESSION 4:

Where to Find Stuff: Rainboots

Our fourth session was dedicated to the practical parts of school administration. We surveyed twenty elementary Principals about the items they keep in their offices to support their daily work. We used their responses to play a game of Family Feud.



SESSION 5:

Parent Advisory Councils

In this session, we focused on working with parents and families in the community and working with the Parent Advisory Council (PAC). We asked our District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) president to share with us the PAC's top five recommendations for working together. This was very valuable information for our participants, as many had not yet worked with a PAC in this capacity.

SESSION 6:

Celebration

Our final session was a celebration of the learning in IGL, but also the end of the school year. We asked the participants to contribute images over the course of the year that best captured their growth as a school leader, and presented a final slideshow highlighting all of the participants. We finished our session by playing a game of IGL Jeopardy with questions based on the experiences we collectively shared.

learning

"Time to meet, talk, and debrief
in our groups has been valuable.
My 'table family' will be a group
to connect with moving forward.
(Our facilitator) guides the conversation,
offers thoughts and ideas,
but his best attribute is that
with simple questions,
he is able to force us to dig
just a little deeper in our thinking."

(BCPVPA Program Attendee)

NEW LEARNINGS: IS THE PROGRAM MAKING AN IMPACT ON THE NEW ADMINISTRATORS?

Leanne's Perspective

Building relationships is a key factor in what I have learned from Craig. Each session incorporated time for participants to share with each other their response to a focused question, and tying in how things are going in their buildings. The conversations ended up being what many of the participants (and I!) really enjoyed. At a time where in-person gatherings were still not happening, it gave members a time to share and learn from one another. As evidenced by the slide show at the end, everyone came away learning something new from someone else. These sessions weren't about Craig and I sharing expertise (which Craig has, and I am still learning!) but about facilitating discussion and learning together. Participants are continuing to connect although the sessions have ended, and they have even started their own book club! The slides that each participant made demonstrated their takeaways, and the key pieces of information that stood out for them.

Craig's Perspective

I was pleasantly surprised at the positive response we received from the participants. One of the telling indicators was the participants' desire to continue networking after our session had ended, leaving me to recognize the value of developing a trustworthy network for new administrators. It was also important to root the sessions with the leadership framework, as it aligns not only with the district strategic plan but also supports the development of their professional growth plans.

It was also critical to include Leanne in the design of the sessions. Her perspective on the types of supports a new administrator needs helped to shape sessions that were relevant for the participants. I also felt that our two perspectives and levels of experience brought a balanced approach to supporting the group. Even with eighteen years of administrative experience, I recognized that I would have blind spots when developing this mentorship series.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship is important to nurture a new leader. Mentorship is also critical to support and retain leaders in a challenging and complex profession. The **Intentionally Growing Leaders** series also connected the work we do with the district's leadership framework and strategic plan. This framework gave participants the opportunity to hear different perspectives and learn from one another. The benefit was planning these sessions with the lens of different levels of experience. Leanne has a few years of experience ahead of most of the participants, and was able to provide a perspective that identified things that may be taken for granted by someone like Craig, who has many years of experience. The importance of creating a thoughtful network not only supports the development of new administrators, but also creates conditions that help retain leaders.

REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS FROM THE IGL PARTICIPANTS

Once we completed the six sessions, we asked the participants for some feedback about the format and the topics covered. This is some of the feedback we received.

"Providing a format to dig into these things in a safe community (à la Family Feud) was so helpful!"

"The networking, connecting, and sharing of on-the-ground learning was great, and the most important part."

"I would hope we could join a second year... It is good to hear all this information more than once, and it is also nice to connect with people."

"One thing that stood out to me was how well we were supported without putting a lot of pressure on us. It felt like it was a fun and welcoming space, with a fantastic group of new hires and of course led by two VERY welcoming leaders :) I really looked forward to our time together, knowing that I would always leave with a learning or reflection takeaway, and a feeling of being more connected to the group."

Leanne Kemp is Vice-Principal at Scott Creek Middle School.

Craig Mah is currently District Principal of School Services and Special Projects.

Both Craig and Leanne work in the Coquitlam School District (SD 43).