
LEADERSHIP ECOSYSTEMS – A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

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Education | Arts | Leadership | Strategy

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines an approach for developing an integrated system of leadership in a school: an approach that systematically focuses attention on collectively improving school and student outcomes – the development of a leadership ecosystem that is contextualised, intentional, integrated, and self-improving.

ABOUT A LEADERSHIP ECOSYSTEM

Leadership in schools is critical for improving student outcomes (Seashore et al, 2010; Robinson et al, 2008), but how much time do schools spend discussing their collective leadership approach? Schools and school systems focus significant effort and resources on developing school leaders and building effective leadership teams, but spend little time developing approaches to leadership that bring together all the leadership activity at a school.

There is significant opportunity to improve the impact of leadership in schools by being more explicit about what leadership looks like – what it stands for, what it is focused on and how it will operate at a school. By investing intentional effort in developing an agreed whole-school collaborative leadership approach there is huge potential for school communities to create integrated self-improving ecosystems of leadership.

Natural ecosystems have successfully operated across our planet for millennia – creating comprehensive, coherent, and integrated systems of operation. Using an ecosystem model to develop a school's leadership approach provides an opportunity to create a system of leadership aligned to local needs, interests, and aspirations – an interconnected system to guide formal and informal

leadership practice, process, and effort across a school. It provides school leaders with a frame to guide their leadership activity and it provides the school community with an opportunity to hold leaders to account for the way in which they lead.

A leadership ecosystem provides an opportunity to create a more coherent whole-school approach to leadership, a system that will encompass all leaders and all leadership activity – individual, collective, formal, informal, positional and non-positional leadership, practised by principals, teachers, education support staff, students, and parents.

A leadership ecosystem can ensure that leadership is shared more broadly across a school and that it is owned and understood by that school community. There is significant evidence about the impact of collective leadership (Hmieleski, 2012; Bolivar et al, 2013; as cited in Pont, 2020; Angelle and DeHart, 2016) and, by involving the school community in the development and operation of a leadership ecosystem, a school will be well-placed to realise the benefits of that collective leadership effort.

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Ecosystem leadership elements

To assist schools to develop a more collective approach to leadership, five key ecosystem leadership 'elements' are identified here, as follows.

- 1. Leadership context – the internal and external nature and circumstances of the ecosystem.**
Every school is different, and its leadership approach should reflect local conditions. Understanding and building a leadership approach that accounts for internal and external school circumstances creates the foundations of a leadership approach that is aligned with the needs, interests, and aspirations of a school community.
- 2. Leadership vision and principles – the overarching purpose and foundational principles of the ecosystem design and operation.** Creating a shared vision of and principles for leadership at a school creates clarity for both leaders and followers about what leadership stands for and how it operates at the school.
- 3. Leadership processes – the interconnections and systems within and beyond the ecosystem.** Developing clear, effective, consistent, and agreed leadership processes ensures that leadership practice at the school is effective, efficient, comprehensive and coherent.

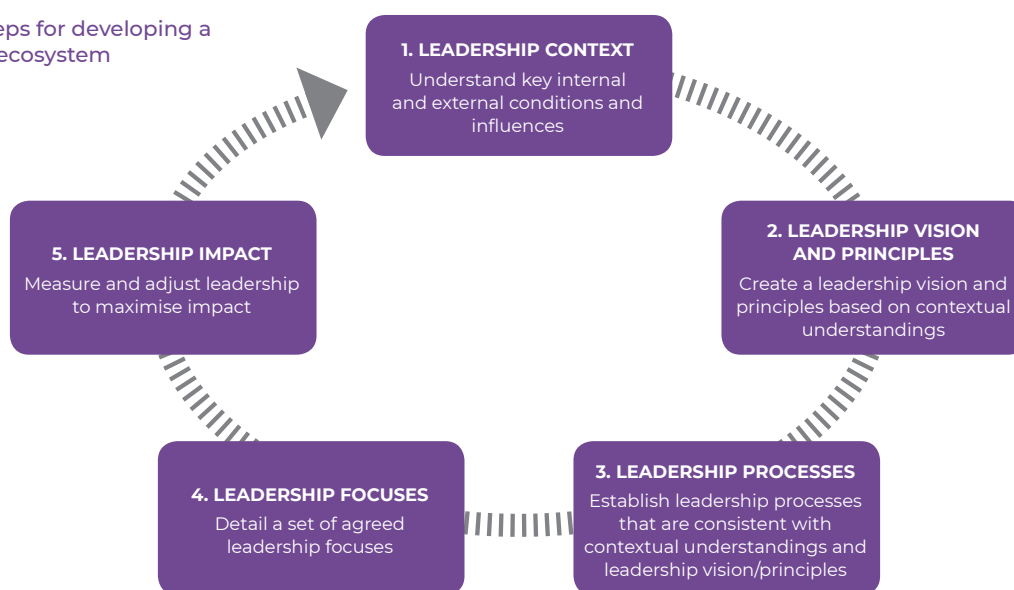
- 4. Leadership focuses – the emphases and priorities of the leadership ecosystem's operation.** Detailing a set of agreed leadership focuses ensures that leadership effort is focused on the things that matter for the school and broader community.
- 5. Leadership impact – the outputs and outcomes that result from the ecosystem's efforts.** Understanding, managing, and improving leadership inputs and outputs provides a framework for resourcing, developing, measuring, and improving leadership performance and impact. It ensures that the leadership system is self-improving.

Ideally a leadership ecosystem should be developed collectively by a school community to ensure that it is aligned with the needs, interests, and aspirations of that community, and that it has broad acceptance and ownership. **Figure 1** provides an overview of the key steps for creating a leadership ecosystem.

When schools develop agreed, coherent, collaborative, and systematic whole-school approaches to leadership, they are better placed to improve school and student outcomes. Leadership ecosystems that align with each school's unique context can help engage, connect, and guide all leaders and leadership activity at a school.

Imagine the power of a coordinated approach to leadership that systematically focuses its attention on collectively improving school and student outcomes – a leadership ecosystem that is intentional, integrated, and self-improving.

Figure 1. Steps for developing a leadership ecosystem



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