





## **The Challenge: Leaders are as Human as Those They Lead**

If the first truth about courageous conversations is that they are key to effective leadership for improvement, the second is that many leaders, if not most, find them difficult and uncomfortable. We often avoid courageous conversations, even when we recognize that they are desperately needed. Leaders are human too, and just as prone to avoiding discomfort as those they lead. In fact, Abrams (2009) has identified 18 reasons we can, and often do, avoid courageous conversations. Leaders are human too, and just as prone to avoiding discomfort as those they lead. In fact, Abrams (2009) has identified 18 reasons we can, and often do, avoid courageous conversations.

Teachers who know that they are allowed to be imperfect works-in-progress can afford to engage in bold self-critique, especially if they are fully aware that the principal sees herself this way too. The role of the leader in setting the scene for continuous improvement is a powerful one that depends on strengthening beliefs, such as self-efficacy, among teachers. In the final analysis, teacher self-efficacy can make all the difference between choosing hope or despair and in deciding whether to engage or not to engage in the challenges of optimizing the learning conditions for all children.

– Leithwood and Beatty, 2008

Courageous conversations are about being true to oneself, doing what is right for students, and shaping an environment that supports learning.

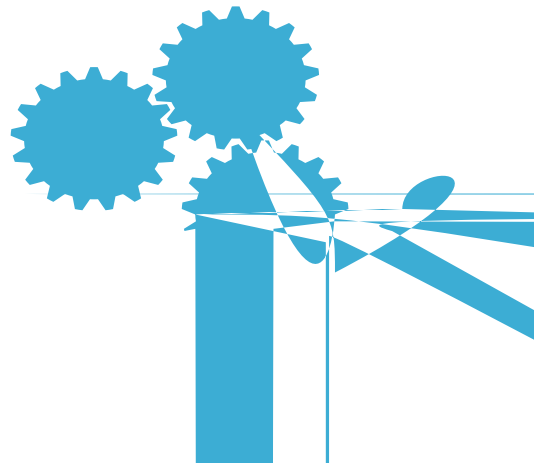
– Adapted from Abrams, 2009

One of the most powerful ways to overcome our own resistance to courageous conversations is to deepen our understanding of what they look like in practice, and how they can empower – rather than threaten – both our own leadership and those we lead.

## **Courageous Conversations in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) 2012**

Within Ontario's Leadership Framework 2012, the practice of engaging in courageous conversations is recognized as vital to successful leadership and is reflected within and across all of the framework's domains. Engaging in courageous conversations is about challenging current practices and fostering improvement and growth through conversation, listening to and acting on feedback, and providing feedback that will lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being. Leaders do this in a variety of ways; for example, they:


- s Build relational trust and establish a culture in which courageous conversations and feedback are seen as necessary for improvement
- s Challenge assumptions at both the individual and the organizational level
- s Integrate description, analysis, prediction and a discussion of the next level of work in every debrief about teaching and learning.



This table illustrates how “engaging in courageous conversations”  
is embedded in the Ontario Leadership Framework 2012

DOMAINS OF THE ONTARIO LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK 2012	SELECTED SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES & EXAMPLES OF WHAT THESE PRACTICES LOOK LIKE IN ACTION	PERSONAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCES: Leaders draw upon their personal





that, while the term “theory” may conjure up thoughts of lofty, abstract ideas, a theory of action is, in fact, a highly practical tool that grounds our strategies in reality and helps us examine them more deeply to produce concrete results.

The authors suggest that an effective theory of action is stated as a series of “If ... then” propositions that can ultimately be tested against real outcomes. For example, “If I take this action ... then the following outcome will result”. They suggest that the “If ... then” structure is an important way we can remind ourselves that each of our theories of action is a proposition that can be tested, and should be subject to revision. The end result is that we have established a platform for continuous improvement and professional learning.

In another synthesis of research that examines school leaders’ influences on student learning, Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, and Strauss (2009) describe four paths through which school leaders

---

and collective commitment that staff bring to the complex task of increasing student achievement and well-being.

Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) draw on the seminal work of Bryk and Schneider (2002) to support the following key observations





Guiding values	

---



## **Professional learning opportunities and resources offered by Ontario leadership associations:**

### **s Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) and Association des gestionnaires de l'éducation franco-ontarienne (AGÉFO):**

ADFO and AGÉFO will be offering a one-day face-to-face provincial session, a web conference and a DVD and guide for school and system leaders focused on building collaborative relationships. In addition, ADFO has developed "Le guide du mentor - mentorat pour les leaders scolaires nouvellement nommés" and training focused on violence against women and its effect on children in our schools. A number of news bulletins and resources can be found on the association websites at [www.adfo.org](http://www.adfo.org) and [www.agefo.ca](http://www.agefo.ca)

### **s Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO) and Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers of Ontario (OCSOA):**

CPCO in partnership with OCSOA hosts one-day workshops with internationally renowned speakers to provide educational leaders with access to current research and information. These shared learning opportunities support implementation of the Ontario Leadership Strategy and the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, while providing networking opportunities to strengthen Catholic education. Learn more at [www.cpco.on.ca](http://www.cpco.on.ca) or [www.ocsoa.ca](http://www.ocsoa.ca).

## **Commercial resources recommended by Ontario leaders:**

- s Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler (2002) provides tools to handle life's most dif cult and important conversations including preparing for high-stakes situations and making it safe to talk about

s The practice of adaptive leadership by Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky (2009) provides tools and tactics for mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and fashion new and better responses.

### **Seven Principles of Fierce Conversations:**

Regardless of our skill and experience, courageous conversations will always be challenging. Scott (2004) advises that we need to focus on passion, integrity, authenticity and collaboration in approaching what she refers to as “erce” conversations, and offers the following seven principles:

**Master the courage to interrogate reality.** What has changed, does the plan still make sense? If not, what is required of you? Of others?

**Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real.** No one has to change, but everyone has to have the conversation. When the conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation is over.

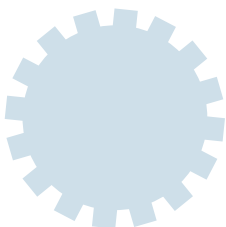
**Be here, prepared to be nowhere else.** Speak and listen as if this is the most important conversation you will ever have with this person.

**Tackle your toughest challenge today.** The problem named is the problem solved. All confrontation is a search for the truth. Healthy relationships include both confrontation and appreciation.

**Obey your instincts.** During each conversation, listen for more than content. Listen for emotion and intent as well. Act on your instincts rather than passing them over for fear that you could be wrong or that you might offend.

**Take responsibility for your emotional wake.** For a leader there is no trivial comment. The conversation is not about the relationship; the conversation is the relationship. Learning to deliver the message without the load allows you to speak with clarity, conviction and compassion.

**Let silence do the heavy lifting.** Talk with people not at them. Memorable conversations include breathing space. Slow down the conversation so that insight can occur in the space between words.



The Institute for  
Education Leadership  
(IEL)

Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership is a unique partnership committed to exploring leading-edge thinking on education leadership and applying that expertise to the development of high-quality resources and learning opportunities for school, board, and system leaders. As part of its work on research into practice the IEL has adopted the Ontario Leadership Framework 2012 and continues to support and promote it as a powerful vehicle for strengthening school and system leadership in the province.

Visit: [www.education-leadership-ontario.ca](http://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca) for more information about the IEL, upcoming events, leadership research, and a variety of tools and resources for leaders.

## A Call to Action

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) 2012 remains the key foundation of initiatives being undertaken within the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). **The Ontario Leadership Framework** includes the leadership practices found to be effective for most schools and systems in most contexts and a small but critical number of personal resources which leaders draw on in order to enact effective leadership practices including cognitive, social and psychological resources.

The framework consists of four key components: school-level leadership; the K-12 School Effectiveness Framework; system-level leadership; and a district effectiveness framework. Five Core Leadership Capacities, taken from the Ontario Leadership Framework, are the province's focus for capacity building beginning in 2009-10.

*Ideas Into Action* is designed to support and align with this capacity building, which is being undertaken by the ministry, Ontario's provincial leadership associations, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) and district school boards. It is intended to contribute to your ongoing professional learning and provide you and your colleagues with a meaningful springboard for reflection, professional dialogue and for putting ideas into action.

Do you have insights to share? We are interested in hearing about your experience with courageous conversations – what has worked for you? What professional learning supports have you found to be most effective in strengthening this capacity?

We look forward to your responses, and to sharing excerpts from them in our next issue of *Ideas Into Action* which will focus on "promoting collaborative learning cultures".

Learn more about the Ontario Leadership Strategy at [www.ontario.ca/eduleadership](http://www.ontario.ca/eduleadership).

## REFERENCES

Abrams, J. (2009). Having hard conversations. Thousand Oaks, CAL: Corwin Press.

Argyis, C. (1982). Reasoning, learning, and action: Individual and organizational. San Francisco, CAL: Jossey-Bass.

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. New York, NY: Sage Foundation Publications.

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E. and Teitel, L. (2009). Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning. Cambridge, MASS: Harvard Education Press.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. and Linsky, M. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world. Boston, MASS: Harvard Business Press.

Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2009). Immunity to change. Boston, MASS: Harvard Business Press.

Leithwood, K., Anderson, S., Mascall, B. and Strauss, T. (2009). School leaders' influences on student learning: The four paths. In T. Bush, L. Bell and D. Middlewood (Eds.). The principles of educational leadership and management. London: Sage Publishers.

Leithwood, K. & Beatty, B. (2008). LEADING with teacher emotions IN MIND. Thousand Oaks, CAL: Corwin Press.

Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C. (2003). What we know about successful school leadership. Philadelphia, PA: Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University. (2008).

Levin, B. (2008). How to change 5000 schools: A practical and positive approach for leading change at every level. Cambridge, MASS: Harvard Education Press.

Lewis, M. (2009). Leadership practices that build trust: A closer look at trust and its importance in the principal -teacher relationship. Principal Connections.



Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R. and Switzler, A. (2002).  
Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high. New York,  
NY: McGraw Hill.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Max eld, D., McMillan, R. and Switzler,  
A. (2008). In uencer : The power to change anything. New York,  
NY: McGraw Hill.

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., and Lloyd, C. (2009). School Leadership  
and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why – Best Evidence  
Synthesis Iteration [BES]. New Zealand: Ministry of Education

Scott, S. (2009). How conversations can change educators' and  
students' lives. Journal of Staff Development, 30 (3).

Scott, S. (2004).