# White Paper
Will Principals Be In School Leadership For The Long Run? How Do We Motivate, Engage And Retain Educational Leaders?

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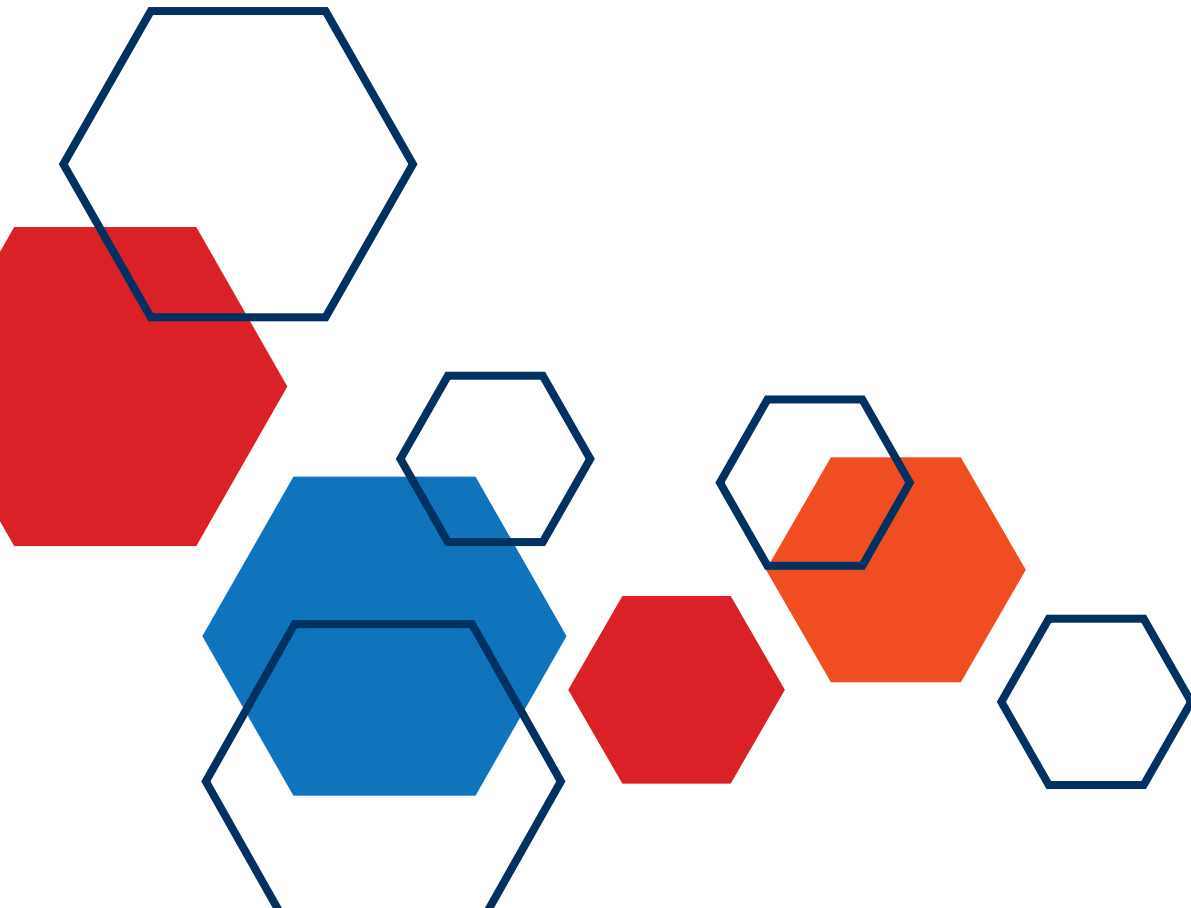
Importance & Impact of Principals

Why is it so important to understand the human side of principals?

Principals play a pivotal role in schools from shaping the outcomes of students through to supporting the extended community and beyond. The breadth and complexity of the principal role are unparalleled and expanding (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020).

In a recent study examining the experiences of our school principals here in Australia, it was clear that the role of the principal has increased in scope and complexity, with principals now responsible for a broader range of tasks and duties than ever before (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020).

We know a lot about principal responsibilities, as well as their impact on schools and students, but what do we know about the human that is the school leader?

Recent literature tells us about a long list of diverse areas that principals are responsible for (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020; Janse Van Vuuren & Van der Bank, 2023), including:

- Setting the vision, mission, and goals for their schools

- Fostering an environment that is conducive to academic growth and achievement

- Managing the school's day-to-day operations, overseeing budgets, staffing and facilities

- Providing instructional guidance and advice to teachers

- Enforcing school discipline policies and promoting a positive and respectful school culture

- Fostering partnerships and bridging connections between the school, parents, and the community

- Contributing to curriculum development and assessment

Not only has the scope increased, but we know the complexity, cognitive load, and emotional toll have increased as well. Principals impact a vast range of critical human, psychosocial, emotional and cultural factors within the school context including, but not limited to (Bartanen, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019):

- Driving student attendance, engagement, and achievement

- Sustaining teacher satisfaction and retention

- Enriching school culture and organisational health

- Supporting development and personal growth

- Navigating mental health challenges and psychosocial hazards

- Nurturing wellbeing and safety of students and staff

Given the crucial role of principals and the significant impact that they have on the school community, supporting and retaining principals needs to be a high priority. To effectively do this, it is important that we consider the human characteristics that lead people to become principals and the way in which these same characteristics could be strengths and challenges for sustained leadership effectiveness when in the role.

The breadth and complexity of the role is unparalleled and expanding....

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Complexities & Challenges

A comprehensive understanding of the challenges principals face, and the various factors influencing their wellbeing and retention is crucial to effectively support, engage and retain them.

Complexities of the Principal Role

Principals face a range of challenges that can impact their well-being and effectiveness, as well as their desire to remain in the role. In a study examining the experiences of Australian principals, it was observed that the role of the principal has increased in scope and complexity, with principals now responsible for a wider range of tasks and duties than in the past (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020). As a result, principals have encountered an increased pace and workload in overseeing schools, facing challenges in finding sufficient time to fulfil the demands of their roles within a reasonable working week. This often results in their professional responsibilities encroaching on their personal time. Many principals described the role as overwhelming, noting that their workload and well-being are at a critical point. The demanding nature of the role emerged as a key factor significantly affecting their personal relationships, health and well-being, and opportunities to engage in self-care activities. Many principals also felt that there was little support available to them further compounding the issue.

Additionally, it is important to note that an awareness of the challenges encountered by school principals can impact people's interest in stepping into the role. For example, perceptions of the time commitments associated with the role, particularly its impact on family and personal time, may discourage potential candidates (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020). Addressing some of the challenges faced by principals may contribute to enhancing the number of people who are attracted to pursue a career in the role.

Challenges Associated with Transitioning into a Principal Role

Transitioning into a principal role can be a challenging and complex process. As outlined in a report by AITSL, individuals transitioning into the role, who are often highly successful teachers, commonly face specific challenges (AITSL, n.d.). These challenges include:

- *Professional isolation* - feelings of isolation and loneliness due to the demands of the role such as greater accountability, changing relationships with colleagues, and the weight of being the final decision-maker.

- *Administration and management* – specific skills, such as financial management, become essential, which were not necessarily required in teaching roles.

- *Workload challenges* – need to contend with the volume and nature of demands, juggling competing priorities, and limited time to focus on leading teaching and learning due to the administrative workload.

- *Staff development and management* – effective leadership requires strong people management skills and involves challenges that can be time-consuming and stressful.

- *Engagement with the school community* – may face hurdles in connecting with a new school community and encounter transition-related changes such as resistance to changes and unrealistic expectations.

- *Tailoring professional preparation* – experience gained as a teacher may not equip individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge required to be an effective school principal.

Principals with less experience have been found to report higher levels of stress due to work demands and more negative health and well-being outcomes than their more experienced colleagues (See et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the importance of ensuring that individuals transitioning into a principal role receive the necessary support to navigate potential challenges and thrive within the role.

Top Challenges and Stressors for Principals

In the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (See et al., 2022) the top stressors for principals included:

- Quantity of work

- Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning

- Teacher shortages

- Mental health issues of students and staff

Many stressors were recorded at their highest levels since the survey commenced in 2011, with almost half of Australian school leaders found to be at risk of experiencing severe mental health conditions. The report suggested that the occupational health and wellbeing of many Australian school leaders is at a tipping point, with the number of principals wanting to retire or quit early tripling since 2019.

It was also observed that principals appear to be working in more stressed school cultures as indicated by declines in job satisfaction, mutual trust between employees, and trust regarding management. The results were found to be at their lowest levels since the commencement of the survey in 2011. However, despite these challenges, school principals were found to have high levels of meaningfulness in their work and commitment to the workplace. This aligns with other research indicating that principals often report higher levels of job satisfaction compared to the general population. This elevated satisfaction is usually attributed to the positive impact that their work can have on students and families (AITSL, n.d.).

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Deepening Our Understanding Of The Human Side of Principals

ialign, in partnership with Hogan Assessment Systems, has gathered data from standardised, robust scientifically validated measurements of almost 1000 school leaders over the last decade and this has enabled us to develop an understanding of the key factors affecting principals. These measurements included:
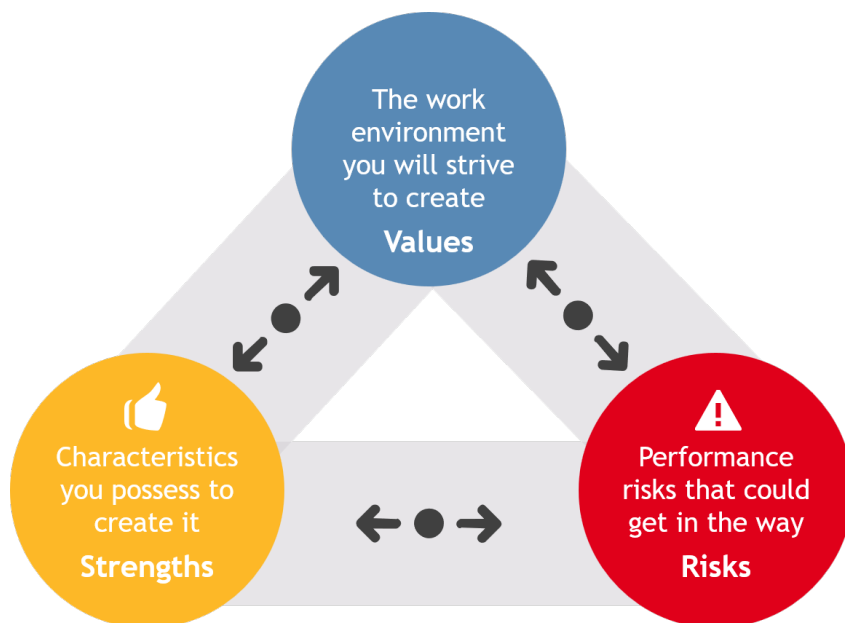
- Motives, Values and Preferences Inventory (MVPI): provides valuable insights into the kind of environment someone is likely to find most motivating, as well as the kind of culture they are likely to cultivate as a leader (Hogan & Hogan, 2010).

- Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI): a valuable tool for gauging normal day-to-day personality tendencies including insights into their approach to work and interactions with others (Hogan & Hogan, 2007).

- Hogan Development Survey (HDS): designed to examine tendencies that can emerge when people experience pressure or when their guard is down (Hogan & Hogan, 2009).

We have gathered valuable insights into the needs, personality characteristics, and leadership styles of Australian school leaders, as well as how they are likely to approach the situations and challenges associated with educational leadership. We have been able to observe what environments they are likely to find most motivating, where their strengths may lie, and what may contribute to some of the challenges they face.

Our research into the nuances of the Hogan Assessment data has enabled us to differentiate what really matters for leaders in schools, in contrast to other measures that generically consider 'leadership' across all sectors or industries. By deeply understanding the unique personality, motivators, and drivers of school leaders we can help in identifying strategies to more effectively support them.

The findings in the following section are based on an analysis of data from a sample of 773 Australian school leaders that was conducted by PBC, the Australian distributor of the Hogan assessments and a data sample of 618 school leaders that was conducted by ialign Pty Ltd. This analysis provides detailed insights into how the motivators, personality traits, and potential derailers of Australian school leaders align with the demands of their leadership roles.

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What Motivates School Leaders?

To effectively engage and motivate school leaders, it is important to understand what motivates and interests them. We sought to obtain insight into the key motivators of Australian school leaders by looking at how Australian school leaders scored on the Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI; Hogan & Hogan, 2010).

It is essential to recognise that there is likely to be diversity among school leaders in terms of what motivates and interests them. Understanding the personal motivators and drivers of each school leader can contribute to fostering their motivation and engagement at work. That said, a substantial proportion of school leaders scored in the high or low ranges for certain MVPI scales, suggesting recurring values and motivators that may tend to be prevalent amongst school leaders.

Sharing Credit & Modesty

A large proportion of school leaders (58.73%) scored in the low range on the Recognition scale, which measures values associated with acknowledgement, visibility, and appreciation. This trend suggests a preference among many school leaders for working in environments where they can share credit, often embodying a more modest stance towards their achievements and contributors. While modesty is commendable, it introduces the risk of potential underappreciation for the school leader's efforts and accomplishments.

Additionally, a school leader's lower emphasis on recognition may influence their approach to acknowledging and rewarding others' achievements. There could be instances where these school leaders would benefit from proactively highlighting the positive aspects of their school and their leadership. Additionally, fostering a practice of acknowledging and recognising the contributions and achievements of others may enhance the overall school culture.

Helping & Supporting Others

A notable 67.10% of school leaders scored in the high range on the Altruistic scale which measures the desire to help and support others. The results indicate a prevalent motivation amongst school leaders to care about others' morale and well-being and their personal growth and development. School leaders are likely to emphasise fostering a sense of community and cultivating a positive and supportive school environment. Their altruistic tendencies may translate into a strong commitment to the welfare and growth of both students, teachers and the community. This motivation drives them to foster a collaborative and nurturing school culture, where everyone feels valued and supported.

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However, an important consideration for those who are high on the Altruistic scale is that there can sometimes be an associated tendency to care for and support others at the expense of one's own needs and well-being. The altruistic nature of many school leaders may make them more susceptible to burnout if self-care is not prioritised. This aligns with Horwood et al. (2021) who noted that a school principal's passion can be a double-edged sword leading to both good and bad outcomes, specifically higher levels of job satisfaction but also burnout. It can be challenging for individuals who are higher on Altruism to allow themselves to focus on their own needs, as they can tend to feel guilty about taking the time to invest in themselves. However, engaging in activities that nurture their wellbeing and development is likely to enhance their performance and ability to help and support others.

People Over Finances

A substantial number of school leaders (64.07%) scored in the low range on the Commerce scale, which measures interest in financial and business-related matters. Given the high levels of altruism found amongst school leaders, this may indicate a tendency to prioritise people-related concerns over financial considerations. Many school leaders may derive less satisfaction and exhibit a reduced interest in the aspects of their role associated with business and financial-related matters, such as budgeting and financial planning. However, school leaders may find an increasing demand for them to adopt a business-

orientated approach, with the school environment becoming increasingly KPI-based. In light of this, school leaders may appreciate and need support specifically tailored to the financial and business-related aspects of school management.

Creativity & Self-Expression

A large proportion of school leaders (46.18%) exhibited high scores on the Aesthetics scale, which measures valuing self-expression, innovation, and creativity. This may contribute to these school leaders valuing innovative and creative approaches to education, and opportunities to engage in experimentation, exploration, and creative problem-solving. They may tend to pay attention to the quality, look and feel of aspects within the school environment and seek to create a school environment that inspires and motivates students and staff to engage in creative problem-solving. In light of the increasingly complex work environment that school leaders need to navigate, the ability to approach issues with creativity may be highly beneficial for principals.
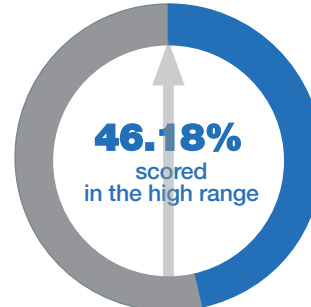
58.73%
scored
in the low range
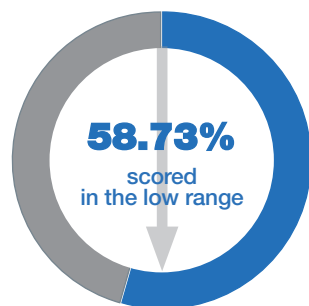
RECOGNITION
*Valuing acknowledgement
and appreciation*

67.10%
scored
in the high range
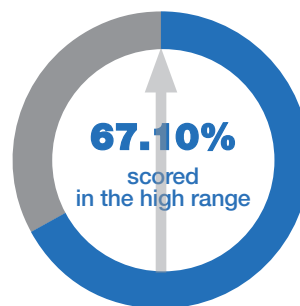
ALTRUISTIC
*Valuing helping and
supporting others*

64.07%
scored
in the low range
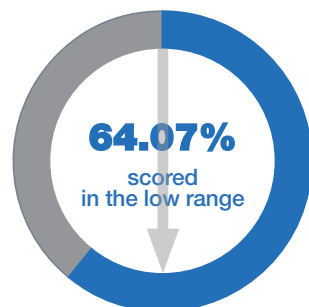
COMMERCE
*Valuing financial and
management-related matters*

46.18%
scored
in the high range

AESTHETICS
*Valuing innovation and
creativity*

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Approach to Work & Interactions

Obtaining insights into a school leader's everyday personality tendencies can be valuable in understanding individual working styles and identifying potential strengths and growth opportunities. For school leaders, this understanding can provide insight into how to best support them and leverage their strengths for enhanced engagement and performance at work.

The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) serves as a valuable tool in gauging normal day-to-day personality tendencies (Hogan & Hogan, 2007). Analysing the results from a sample of Australian school leaders revealed a diverse range of tendencies, indicating varying strengths, leadership styles and approaches to situations and challenges. This diversity in school leader personalities highlights the importance of a personalised approach in supporting and developing them. Tailoring support and development based on individual characteristics ensures a more effective and targeted strategy for fostering their unique strengths, addressing specific challenges, and ultimately promoting successful leadership in diverse educational environments.

While individual differences were evident, there were notable instances where a significant number of school principals scored in the higher range of specific scales, implying shared tendencies within this group of educational leaders.

Tactful and Considerate

A large proportion of school leaders (50.40%) scored within the high range on the Interpersonal Sensitivity scale which measures the degree to which a person seems perceptive, tactful, and socially sensitive. The results suggest that many school principals are likely to be seen as diplomatic, warm, considerate, and nurturing in their relationships. They are inclined to be perceptive and considerate of others' feelings and concerns and adopt a tactful communication style. This may support them in building and maintaining positive working relationships with a wide range of people. These tendencies may also contribute to their ability to encourage cooperation and teamwork and foster trust and respect.

Individuals with a high level of Interpersonal Sensitivity often tend to steer clear of confrontations, posing a potential challenge when engaging in difficult conversations or making decisions that involve people. For these school principals, honing the ability to navigate challenging discussions and make tough people-related choices may be an area for development. Additionally, as many principals with this trait are likely to also be highly altruistic and value supporting others, they may need to be mindful that their kind and considerate disposition

is not exploited, striking a balance between empathy and assertiveness.

In their efforts to be considerate and helpful, these school leaders should guard against overcommitting themselves. A prudent approach involves evaluating their existing commitments and situational demands before taking on additional tasks or responding to requests from others. This discernment may help to ensure not only the preservation of their well-being but also the maintenance of a healthy equilibrium between their altruistic inclinations and the practical demands of their leadership roles.

Conscientious and Dependable

A significant proportion of school leaders (44.88%) scored in the high range on the Prudence scale, which measures the degree to which a person seems conscientious and dependable and includes attributes like being detail-orientated, rule-abiding, planful and organised. These school leaders are likely to hold high standards for their own and others' performance. They are likely to be hardworking and reliable and adopt a structured and organised approach. They will also tend to be attentive to the rules, procedures and details associated with their school.

However, it is important to recognise that school leaders scoring high on Prudence may occasionally encounter difficulties in delegating to others. The inclination to be meticulous and cautious, while often beneficial in maintaining a high standard of work, can result in a reluctance to delegate responsibilities, especially when coupled with high altruistic tendencies. These school leaders may find themselves hesitating to delegate due to concerns about burdening others or a desire to ensure that tasks are handled with the same level of care and consideration.

Encouraging open communication within the team and emphasising the benefits of collaboration can help individuals with this combination of traits navigate the delegation process more effectively. By fostering a cooperative and supportive work environment, these individuals can overcome hesitations related to delegation and enhance both their leadership impact and the overall productivity of the team.

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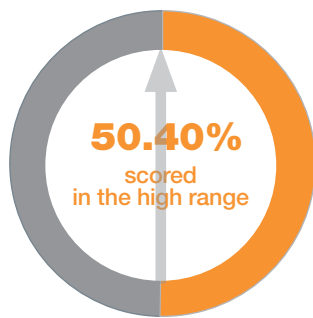
Curious and Creative

A large proportion of school leaders (40.30%) scored in the high range on the Inquisitive scale which measures the degree someone is likely to be curious and take a creative or innovative approach to problem-solving. These school leaders are likely to present as resourceful problem solvers, adept at generating a variety of ideas and solutions. It will be important for them to provide a solid rationale for ideas and to articulate them in a manner that garners commitment and support. This may include striking a balance by incorporating consideration of the practical aspects, ensuring the viability and effective implementation of their more creative and innovative ideas and solutions.

Additionally, school leaders who exhibit higher levels of curiosity and creativity may be more prone to experiencing boredom, especially when dealing with more routine or mundane aspects of their role. This challenge may be addressed by incorporating variety into their professional responsibilities and seeking diverse projects that engage their inquisitive nature. By cultivating an environment that encourages ongoing intellectual stimulation, these school leaders may sustain their enthusiasm for creative problem-solving and innovation.

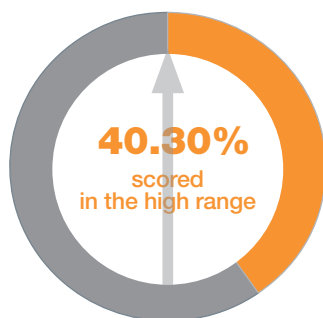**Enjoy and Value Educational Achievement**

A large proportion of school leaders (48.92%) scored in the high range on the Learning Approach scale, reflecting a strong inclination towards enjoying academic activities and valuing educational achievement. This indicates that these educational leaders are likely to actively stay across current trends and developments applicable to their roles and the education industry. They are also likely to push for continuous learning and training opportunities for themselves and staff and enjoy applying their knowledge to situations.
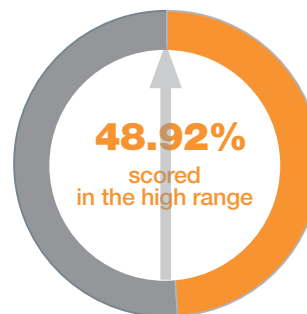

50.40%
scored
in the high range

INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

Seeming empathetic and compassionate

44.88%
scored
in the high range
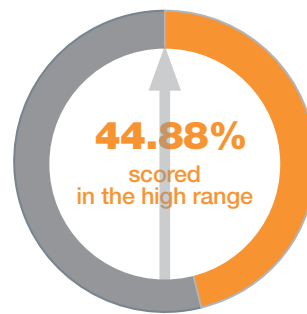
PRUDENCE

Seeming conscientious and responsible

40.30%
scored
in the high range

INQUISITIVE

Seeming curious and explorative

48.92%
scored
in the high range

LEARNING APPROACH

Seeming knowledge-seeking

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When Their Guard is Down

Understanding how school leaders respond when not at their best (e.g., under pressure or when their guard is down) may be useful in identifying how to best support them and help them remain engaged and motivated. The Hogan Development Survey (HDS) is an assessment that is designed to examine tendencies that can emerge when people experience conditions when their guard is down (Hogan & Hogan, 2009). While the tendencies that are examined by the HDS can sometimes be strengths and serve people well, when these strengths are overplayed, such as when their guard is down, they can have a negative impact on aspects such as a person's leadership style and relationships.

When analysing the results from a sample of Australian school leaders, a diverse range of tendencies emerged, demonstrating the varied ways in which school leaders respond when their guard is down. This diversity highlights the need for an individualised and targeted approach when producing developmental strategies for school principals. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of school leaders scored in the elevated risk range for some scales which are described below.

Overly Compliant and Eager to Please

A notable percentage of school leaders (50.58%) exhibited elevated scores on the Dutiful scale, indicating a tendency to be compliant, conforming, and eager to please others. However, when lacking effective self-management, their strong desire to please others may result in them saying 'yes' when it would be beneficial for them to assertively say 'no'. This can result in a reluctance to decline additional tasks, requests, or responsibilities, potentially resulting in overcommitment and work overload that hinders their ability to effectively manage their time and priorities.

Continuously striving to please others and prioritising others' needs over one's own can be emotionally and physically draining, significantly elevating the risk of burnout if excessive tasks are undertaken without establishing appropriate boundaries. It is crucial for school leaders to actively set and enforce boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance that is indispensable for ensuring effective leadership.

Additionally, those with elevated scores on the Dutiful scale may tend to seek approval or consensus before making decisions, particularly when under pressure. This may result in them seeming hesitant to act independently or decisively.

A reluctance to 'rock the boat' may lead to agreements made solely to maintain harmony, inadvertently stifling the sharing of their valuable insights and opinions. Preferring to defer to others' judgements, these individuals may avoid confrontations and find it challenging to engage in difficult conversations or go against the status quo.
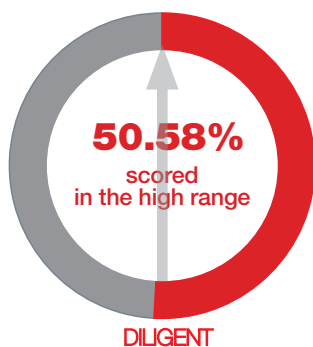
To address these challenges, these school leaders are likely to benefit from targeted development focused on empowering them to strike a balance between their tendency to seek approval and please others and the need for independent decision-making. Building assertiveness will enable them to express their opinions and ideas confidently without compromising their cooperative and considerate nature. Additionally, equipping them with the skills to navigate difficult conversations, address disagreements, and find mutually beneficial solutions will contribute to their professional growth and effectiveness as leaders.

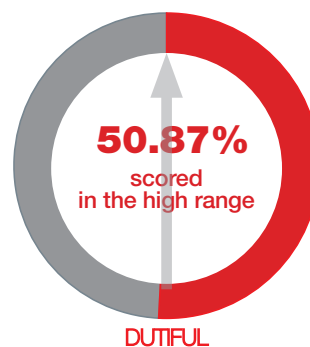**High Standards with Difficulties Delegating**

A significant percentage of principals (50.87%) had elevated scores on the Diligent scale, suggesting a tendency to be hardworking, detail-orientated and set high standards and expectations. However, when these tendencies are overplayed, it can lead to challenges such as being overly perfectionistic, experiencing difficulties with delegation, micromanaging staff, being inflexible, and fixating on details at the expense of the bigger picture.

The responsibilities of running a school and managing staff, students, and administrating tasks are extensive. Being reluctant to delegate and attempting to shoulder every responsibility alone may result in both physical and emotional exhaustion and a decline in overall productivity. A principal's time and energy are finite resources, and attempting to manage everything alone can divert focus from high-priority tasks and strategic planning.

A lack of delegation also impacts staff members. They may miss out on valuable opportunities for professional development and growth when responsibilities are not distributed effectively. Delegation is a powerful tool that allows individuals to embrace new challenges, acquire new skills, and contribute meaningfully to the school's overall success. Beyond its practical benefits, effective delegation fosters collaboration and team building. It serves as a means for principals to acknowledge and leverage the strengths of their team members, empowering them to make substantial contributions to the school's achievements.

50.58%
scored
in the high range

DILIGENT

Meticulous but have difficulties delegating

50.87%
scored
in the high range

DUTIFUL

Loyal but overly eager to please

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Five Key Areas for Principals

Over-Commitment, Burnout & Self-Care

School leaders in Australia are spread too thin and overcommitment has become the norm. Principals are facing intense job demands that extend into their personal time and impact their health and family life (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022). The human impact of challenging job demands, such as role conflict, number of responsibilities, or time pressure, cannot be underestimated. Very high job demands are reported to be related to burnout, especially when people do not have the required resources to manage the demands (Lesener et al. 2019). The 2022 Australian Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey highlighted that principals face unsustainable stress due to workload, teacher shortages, and mental health challenges among students and staff (Branson et al., 2024). Many principals describe the role as having a significant impact on their opportunities to engage in self-care (Ray et al., 2020), with their wellbeing being at a critical point. Additionally, many principals felt that there was little support available to them (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020).

When we consider our data, we see a strong drive amongst school leaders to create a positive environment, with a large proportion of principals (50.40%) having the tendency to be diplomatic, considerate, and generous with their time (Hogan HPI: Interpersonal Sensitivity). 67.10% of school leaders prioritise creating supportive environments (Hogan MVPI: Altruism), often at their own expense. While their interpersonal sensitivity does support effective leadership, continuous compassion can risk emotional exhaustion (Angelini, 2023). The warm, caring, altruistic nature of many school leaders makes them vulnerable, if self-care is not prioritised.

Continuously giving to others, striving to please all stakeholders and prioritising others' needs over one's own is emotionally and physically draining. Within our data, a notable proportion of school leaders (50.58%) exhibited a strong tendency to be agreeable, conforming, and eager to please others – acquiescing to others' needs and expectations at the cost of their own (Hogan HDS: Dutiful). This can lead to challenges in setting boundaries and declining additional responsibilities, resulting in overload. Principals' altruism and desire to maintain harmony can be beneficial but, when overused, may contribute to burnout (Hogan & Hogan, 2009). It is crucial for principals to actively set and enforce boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance that is indispensable for ensuring effective leadership.

Horwood et al. (2021) noted that a school principal's passion can be a double-edged sword leading to both good and bad outcomes – their wholehearted investment in what they do gives a sense of meaning, but at the same time, it depletes energy and wellbeing. Ultimately this highlights that it is important to consider the unsustainable tendency to care for and support others at the expense of one's own needs and well-being. Effective leadership thus requires prioritising self-care and stress management. Principals must recognise the importance of self-care to sustain their leadership and set a healthy example for others.

To address these challenges, principals are likely to benefit from targeted coaching focused on empowering them to strike a balance between their tendency to seek approval and please others and the need for independent decision-making. Building assertiveness will enable them to confidently express their opinions and ideas, without compromising their cooperative and considerate nature. This discernment may help to ensure not only the preservation of their well-being but also the maintenance of a healthy equilibrium between their altruistic inclinations and the practical demands of their leadership roles.

Navigating Complex Conversations

Many school leaders (50.40%) are inclined to adopt a tactful communication style, and this may support them in building and maintaining positive working relationships with a wide range of people (Hogan HPI: Interpersonal Sensitivity). While a tendency to be perceptive and considerate of others' feelings and concerns emerged, the data also revealed an inclination to steer clear of disagreement or alternate views (ialign: Managing Conflict only 1.5% in High range), which poses a potential challenge when engaging in difficult conversations or navigating decisions that involve staff, students and community. Many principals with these traits are likely to need to be mindful that their kind and considerate disposition is not exploited, striking a balance between empathy and assertiveness.

Additionally, those with elevated scores on the Dutiful scale (50.58%) may tend to seek approval or consensus before making decisions, particularly when under pressure. This could lead to perceptions of hesitation or lacking decisiveness. A desire to maintain harmony may result in agreements made primarily to maintain harmony and avoid conflict, potentially limiting the expression of their valuable ideas and perspectives. By often deferring to others' opinions, they may steer clear of confrontations and struggle with engaging in challenging conversations or going against the status quo. Equipping them with the skills to navigate difficult conversations, address disagreements, and find mutually beneficial solutions may contribute to their capability to improve school performance and create professional growth.

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Delegating Responsibilities

The running of a school, managing staff, supporting students, and administration load is an extensive undertaking. A principal's time and energy are finite resources, and attempting to manage everything alone can divert focus from high-priority tasks.

Our data (Prudence 44.88% in the high range, Diligent 50.87% in the high range) shows that many school leaders are hardworking, conscientious and reliable, with a preference to adopt a structured and organised approach in navigating the challenges of leading in the education context. They are likely to be attentive to the rules, procedures and details associated with their school and hold high standards for their own and others' performance. When these tendencies are overplayed, it can lead to challenges such as being overly perfectionistic, experiencing difficulties with delegation, micromanaging staff, being inflexible, and fixating on details at the expense of the bigger picture.

While the inclination to be meticulous and thorough, is often beneficial in maintaining a high standard of work, this reluctance to delegate responsibilities and attempt to shoulder every responsibility alone (ialign: Delegating only 6% in the High range) can have many detrimental outcomes often resulting in both physical strain and emotional exhaustion (Bauer & Brazer, 2020; Demerouti et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018). It can also increase stress in the team and deprive others of development opportunities (Hogan et al., 2007).

When coupled with high altruistic tendencies (67.10% in the high range), these school leaders may find themselves hesitating to delegate due to concerns about overburdening others, or a desire to ensure that tasks are handled with the same level of care and consideration.

Making the connection between delegation and growth is critical. Seeing it as an opportunity to allow others to grow, rather than perceiving delegation as burdening others, is a mindset shift that can foster greater trust and respect. It serves as a means for principals to acknowledge and leverage the strengths of their staff, empowering them to make substantial contributions to the school's achievements.

Delegation is a powerful tool that allows people to embrace new challenges, acquire new skills, and contribute meaningfully to the school's overall success. Playing to their strengths in encouraging open communication and emphasising the benefits of collaboration can help principals navigate the delegation process more effectively. By letting go of the 'I should not burden others' narrative, principals can overcome hesitations related to delegation and enhance both their leadership impact and the overall productivity of the team. That said, it's often easier said than done.

Celebrating Success

Our data consistently confirms a well-understood story about school leaders creating environments where they focus on others (67.10% in the high range on altruism), often embodying a modest stance in relation to their impact and achievements. In our data, over 50% of school leaders school leaders scored in the low range on the Recognition scale, suggesting most school leaders dislike public praise, avoid the spotlight and

are unlikely to make a big fanfare about achievements. The tendency for principals to not actively seek accolades or the limelight can result in them failing to acknowledge within themselves their achievements (even in a quiet, reflective moment). While modesty is commendable, it introduces the risk of potential underappreciation for the principal's efforts and accomplishments.

Not only does this affect themselves, but a principal's lower emphasis on recognition, may influence their approach to acknowledging and recognising others' achievements. Celebrating success and feeling the shared enthusiasm for the small things is critical in the challenging intangible environment of education. Those small steps that make a big difference can easily go unnoticed but are important factors in deriving a sense of meaning from your work in the long term.

Our data suggests that educators don't need a 'pat on the back' to be motivated or a large fanfare of celebration, however, feeling valued and appreciated is critical. Studies collectively affirm that while educators are often intrinsically driven, the experience of being valued and appreciated directly contributes to their emotional resilience, sense of purpose, and connection to their roles (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2019; Lim, 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2017).

Despite initial feelings of trepidation and discomfort, many school leaders may benefit from deliberate practice in proactively highlighting the positive aspects of their school and their leadership. Fostering a practice of publicly acknowledging the impact, contributions and achievements of themselves and others is likely to have positive impacts on many aspects of school culture and ultimately enhance retention.

Igniting Curiosity & Agility

Often creative, adventurous, and open-minded school leaders tend to think quickly on their feet and cultivate an environment that encourages ongoing intellectual stimulation (40.30% in the high range for Inquisitive and 48.92% in the high range for Learning Approach). We need to support principals in sustaining their enthusiasm for creative problem-solving and innovation. As the education sector continues to rapidly transform in complexity, so too are the demands on school leaders. The need to support agility, diversity of thought and autonomy of practice is greater than ever.

In our data, a large proportion of school leaders (40.30%) scored in the high range on the Inquisitive scale. They are likely to be curious and take a creative or innovative approach to problem-solving. These school leaders are resourceful problem solvers, adept at introducing a variety of ideas and solutions to the table. To create a long-term, sustained collective strength, and ultimately retain school leaders within the system, we need to enable school leaders to lean into their strengths.

Systems need to explicitly reduce barriers to success. From an engagement perspective, the need has never been greater to support and empower the inquisitive minds of our school leaders, rather than obstruct the path with unnecessary process, administrative, and compliance requirements.

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What Do We Do Now?

How Can We Better Support and Enhance the Experience of Principals?

Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach to enhance the motivation, engagement, and retention of principals, it is essential to tailor strategies to align with individual circumstances and preferences. Recognising the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and personal drivers, and that principals possess a unique set of values, aspirations, and challenges is paramount. The strategies used need to be flexible and adaptable, considering the dynamic nature of educational leadership and the evolving landscape of challenges and opportunities.

By acknowledging and responding to the specific needs and motivations of principals, a more supportive work environment can be created. This personalised approach can not only boost morale and job satisfaction but also foster a sense of value and recognition among principals. As a result, they are likely to be more motivated, engaged, and inclined to stay within their roles, ultimately contributing to the overall success and stability of the education sector.

Creating a supportive, empowering and rewarding environment is likely to go a long way in enhancing the motivation, engagement, and retention of school principals in Australia. Implementing the following strategies may help cultivate such an environment.

Deepening Self-Awareness for Effective Leadership

Before a principal can strengthen their school environment, team and others around them, first it's critical to develop a deeper understanding of one's thoughts, feelings, actions, and the underlying motivations that drive them.

Enhancing self-awareness among school leaders is essential in managing the complexities of their roles and mitigating the risks of over-commitment and burnout. Using personality and 360 assessments offers a powerful means of achieving this, allowing leaders to understand their strengths, needs and potential blind spots more deeply. However, the need for discernment about the scientific rigour of assessments selected, along with the ability to deliver meaningful insights into leadership impact and school culture cannot be underestimated. To translate complex personality and 360 data into actionable strategies, it is essential that the assessments provide reliable and valid insights.

Given the rising demand for data-driven decision-making in education, it's no surprise that educational organisations have begun to adopt assessment practices for leaders. However, while these tools may offer valuable data, they are not always aligned with the nuanced demands of educational leadership, which go far beyond corporate management. Assessments need to be aligned with the complexities of educational leadership.

Strengthening Leadership Capability and Impact

By investing in their own professional growth, principals often experience a renewed sense of purpose and passion for their roles. They gain the confidence to tackle challenges, implement innovative solutions, and set ambitious goals for their schools. Furthermore, the recognition of their commitment to ongoing learning and self-improvement can boost their self-esteem and morale, contributing to a greater sense of engagement and motivation.

In this way, investing in growing their capability, not only equips school principals with the tools they need to excel in their positions but also reignites their enthusiasm for the important work they do in shaping the future of their students and schools.

Coaching is one form of development that principals may find valuable, offering them individualised support, tailored to their unique challenges and aspirations. Providing a safe and confidential space, coaching enables principals to explore their leadership strengths and areas for improvement. Through the coaching process, principals can gain clarity, set achievable goals, and receive constructive feedback, fostering not only confidence but also equipping them with practical strategies to navigate obstacles. Witnessing their growth, principals may rediscover a sense of purpose and passion for their work. The personalised nature of coaching may also help address specific issues that are hindering their motivation, ultimately leading to a greater sense of engagement and enthusiasm in their leadership roles.

To address the common needs outlined in this paper, principals are likely to benefit from coaching focused on:

- Empowering them to strike a balance between their tendency to seek approval and please others and the need for independent decision-making. Building assertiveness will enable them to confidently express their opinions and ideas, without compromising their cooperative and considerate nature. This discernment may help to ensure not only the preservation of their well-being but also the maintenance of a healthy equilibrium between their altruistic inclinations and the practical demands of their leadership roles.

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- Understanding their barriers and blind spots around areas such as delegation. Recognising how they can play to their strengths in encouraging open communication and emphasising the benefits of collaboration can help principals navigate the delegation process more effectively. By letting go of the 'I can't burden others' narrative, principals can overcome hesitations related to delegation and enhance both their leadership impact and the overall productivity of the team.

- Navigating difficult conversations, addressing how to work through interpersonal and professional disagreements, and having the courage to engage in finding mutually beneficial solutions will contribute to their capability to improve school performance and create professional growth.

Fostering Healthier and More Balanced Work Environments

School principals play a pivotal role in shaping their schools' success, yet the demands of their positions can feel overwhelming. Despite initial feelings of discomfort or hesitation, many principals may benefit from deliberate practice in proactively highlighting the positive aspects of their schools and leadership. By fostering a practice of publicly acknowledging the impact, contributions, and achievements of themselves and others, it is likely to have a positive impact on many aspects of their school's culture and ultimately enhance retention.

When principals feel supported by their superiors and have the freedom to innovate, they are more likely to invest their energy and passion into their work. From an engagement perspective, the need has never been greater to support and empower the inquisitive minds of our school leaders.

Given the significant impact of the principal's role on their well-being, engagement, and retention in the role, it is important to implement strategies for enhancing their overall well-being. Principals often face immense workloads, and offering flexible working arrangements, reasonable hours, and support for their time management may help them maintain a healthier balance between their professional and personal lives.

Additionally, implementing programs such as stress-management initiatives, mindfulness training, and mental health equips principals with valuable tools to navigate the challenges inherent in their positions. These initiatives not only contribute to the improvement of their mental and emotional well-being but also play a pivotal role in maintaining engagement by mitigating burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Ultimately, by cultivating a more supportive, healthier and balanced working environment, schools can enable principals to lead more effectively and deliver improved outcomes for students, staff, and the broader school community.

Building Strong and Effective Support Networks

Support networks are crucial for principals and can foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and emotional wellbeing. They offer a space where principals can discuss their experiences, seek guidance, and find comfort among peers who understand the unique challenges and demands of their roles. It is highly recommended that principals actively and regularly engage with their support networks, which may include avenues like professional associations, online communities, or peer discussion groups.

Support networks need to include an effective support structure within the school itself. When principals have a strong network of colleagues, teachers, and administrative staff who share the responsibilities of school management, principals can delegate tasks and collaborate on decision-making. This collective approach not only lightens the workload but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility for the school's success. AITSL has noted that effective school leadership is distributed and collaborative, with teams led by the principal working together to accomplish the vision and aims of the school (AITSL, 2014).

Continuous and comprehensive support, both professionally and personally, helps principals to navigate the challenges of their position with greater ease. Emotional and psychological support is particularly crucial, acting as a safeguard against stress and burnout, ultimately helping principals stay motivated and committed to their roles. Creating avenues for principals to connect with their peers and establish strong support networks is essential for enhancing their overall well-being. These networks offer a sense of community, serve as platforms for sharing experiences, and act as sources of motivation through collaborative problem-solving and knowledge sharing.

SUPPORT NETWORKS

COACHING

SELF AWARENESS
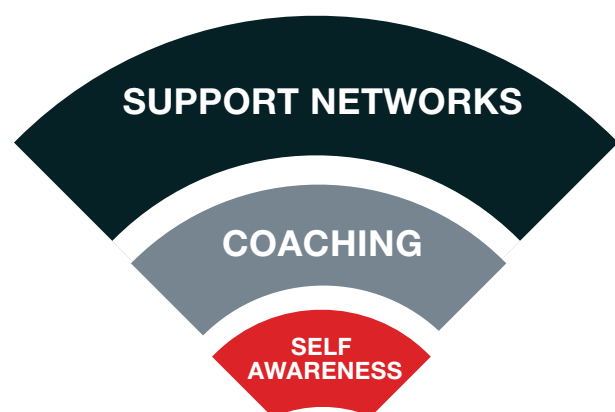
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About ialign

Ialign is an Australian consultancy specialising in psychometric solutions tailored for the education sector. With a strong commitment to supporting the growth and impact of educators and school leaders, ialign provides evidence-based, data-driven insights that combine scientific rigor with practical relevance in the ever-evolving educational landscape.

Partnering with schools and education organisations nationwide, ialign leverages custom psychometric tools to empower leaders, strengthen teams, and enhance decision-making in selection and development. Through tailored assessments, bespoke development plans, and in-depth school culture insights, ialign helps educational leaders make informed decisions that promote individual growth and foster a culture of continuous school improvement.

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