

Chapter 3

The Ontario Leadership Framework: Successful School Leadership Practices and Personal Leadership Resources

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This chapter, in the section of our book about *The Nature of Successful Leadership*, provides a brief but relatively comprehensive account of the leadership practices and personal “resources” identified in the now-significant corpus of research about school-level educational leadership as described by the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF). Now in its second revision, the OLF (Leithwood 2012) serves as a touchstone for the guidance the Ontario government provides to districts and other professional agencies engaged in leadership recruitment, selection, development and appraisal. These are purposes largely shared by numerous other leadership frameworks and standards developed and used in many other educational systems around the world, for example, the U.S. *Professional Standards for School Leaders* (NPBEL 2015), the UK *National Standards for School Leadership* (NCSL 2008) and the *Australian Standard for School Principals* (AITSL 2015).

In addition to what is provided in the OLF itself, a recent comparative analysis of evidence-based leadership frameworks by Hitt and Tucker (2016) provides substantial independent justification for the claim that the OLF is relatively comprehensive. Rather than adding further to that claim, therefore, this chapter provides an overview of selected assumptions on which the OLF is based, describes its key features and illustrates how the OLF responds to some of the more demanding challenges facing leadership framework developers.¹ While the OLF outlines successful practices for both school and district-level leaders, this chapter restricts itself to the school-level focus of the OLF.

¹ Some of the text in this chapter is based directly on the primary OLF reference (Leithwood 2012)

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3.1 Three Assumptions

The three assumptions underlying the OLF examined in this section, were selected from a larger set because they are among the more controversial and complex assumptions likely to be faced by most developers of leadership frameworks.

Assumption One: Successful leadership is better described as “practices” than “competencies”. The OLF describes successful leadership “practices” rather than “competencies”, a concept widely used in the management development field. A competency is typically defined as “an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job” (Carroll et al. 2008, p 364). The commonly cited weaknesses of efforts to define management and (especially) leadership competencies are many, but the most compelling for the OLF is the lack of empirical evidence linking competencies to improved organizational outcomes. Research about effective educational leadership is almost exclusively evident about successful practices.

A “practice” is a bundle of activities exercised by a person or group of persons which reflect the particular circumstances in which they find themselves and with some shared outcome(s) in mind. Conceptualizing leadership as a set of practices reflects both the adaptive qualities (e.g., Heifetz 1999) and expert problem-solving processes (e.g., Leithwood and Steinbach 1995) emphasized in some accounts of effective leadership. So a focus on practices overcomes many of the limitations associated with a focus on competencies. But not all and for good reasons.

First, a commitment to being evidence based means that OLF’s practices necessarily are derived from research about what effective leaders have done in the past, not what they might do in the future. But since our ability to predict those leadership practices likely to be effective in the future is extremely tenuous, to say the least, encouraging leaders to enact what is known now about effective practices seems the most prudent and likely the most productive direction to take in the near term.

Second, in spite of appreciating the integrated nature of effective leadership practices, any attempt at a fuller account of them, as in the OLF, does provide some encouragement for a fragmented understanding of how leadership is exercised. The alternative, however, is to offer forms of guidance to existing leaders (for example, be an “instructional” or a “transformational” leader) which are so abstract as to have almost no practical value.

In addition, some have argued (e.g., English 2006) that any effort to codify either leadership practices or competencies in a set of “standards” or a “framework” promotes a static conception of effective leadership whereas knowledge in the field is decidedly dynamic and evolving. There is no denying the dynamic and evolving nature of research-based knowledge about leadership. Indeed, the field is more active now than it has ever been. But the solution is not to simply throw up one’s hands in despair of capturing existing knowledge. A much more productive solution is to commit to periodic reviews of the field and revisions of previous understandings. While the leadership research field is very active now, it is not so active as to make a “static” description of the field unhelpful for at least a period of 5–7 years.

Assumption Two: The OLF should encompass successful practices, on the part of those exercising leadership, whether those practices are typically categorized as “leadership” or “management”. School leadership has been described for many decades as hectic and fast paced. And it is common to hear many school leaders explain this feature of their jobs as a function of being overburdened with *management* tasks that take away from the time they would prefer to devote to *leadership*. The OLF assumes, however, that once organizations are clear about their goals, their next job is to identify the full array of practices (actions, behaviours or tasks) needed to accomplish those goals and to determine which people in the organization are best suited to be the primary adapters and enactors of those practices. When primary responsibility for enacting a set of practices has been determined, the label associated with that set of practices is irrelevant. Better to simply ask what is it that they (teachers, school administrators, parents, district staff, etc.) need to do to help achieve the organization’s goals.

There are, in addition, several closely related reasons why the leadership/management distinction is not at all useful. First, many practices typically referred to as *management* contribute as much to student learning as many practices typically referred to as *leadership*. For example, Grissom and Loeb (2011) found that principals’ Organizational Management skills had significant and consistently greater effects on student achievement than any of the other four categories of skills that were measured; this set of skills also consistently predicted teacher satisfaction and parents’ ratings of school performance. Internal Relations and Administration skills also had significant but weaker effects on achievement, whereas the effects on achievement of Instructional Management and External Relations were not significant.

An additional reason for rejecting the leadership/management distinction is that many practices typically referred to as *management* are the foundation on which practices typically referred to as *leadership* are built. Those practices typically referred to as leadership are often the practices closest to, or most directly responsible for achieving the end goals of the school. However, whether the time and opportunity to engage in those practices are available often depends, for example, on developing productive timetables and aligning resources with priorities, neither practice jumping out of most conceptions of what “leaders” do.

Assumption Three: People in many roles in schools are able to exercise leadership. So the OLF should provide guidance about exercising leadership to those in many roles. A rapidly growing body of evidence has confirmed the widespread understanding of those who work in schools that many people in schools and school systems provide leadership as defined by the OLF; it is not the exclusive purview of those in formal positions of authority as, for example, principals, vice principals or teacher leaders. Nor is such leadership confined to professional educators in the school. For example, parents are able to exert considerable influence on the purposes to which schools aspire and the processes for realizing those purposes, particularly when they act collectively.

Many claims about the virtues of intentionally sharing leadership – rather than just “letting it happen” – can be found in the literature (Leithwood et al. 2009). It is argued, for example, that shared leadership creates a more democratic organization and provides greater opportunities for collective learning and for teacher develop-

ment. Shared leadership, it is also argued, increases the school's capacity to respond intelligently to the many and complex challenges it faces.

While there is little evidence for most of these claims, some empirical support evidence has begun to suggest that some forms of shared leadership contribute to improved student achievement (Heck and Hallinger 2009; Louis et al. 2010), assist schools to cope productively with rapid leader succession (Mascall and Leithwood 2010) and facilitate school improvement processes (Harris et al. 2003; Higgins and Bonne 2011).

An additional and especially compelling reason for sharing leadership in schools is rooted in Ontario's commitment, a commitment of many other jurisdictions as well, to educational equity and inclusion as well as safe schools with a positive school climate. Prominent theorists and researchers concerned with these elements of social justice (e.g., Ladson-Billings 1995; Ryan 2006) argue that providing equitable opportunities to influence the school and school system's decision making by those whose voices typically have not been heard will lead to significantly improved educational experiences for diverse and disadvantaged students. Such cultural responsiveness, these theorists and advocates argue, requires knowledge about students and their circumstances best acquired directly from those whose interests have been neglected in the past. Sharing leadership with those who possess this knowledge, especially the parents and guardians of diverse and disadvantaged students, is among the most likely ways of acquiring this knowledge.

3.2 Successful Leadership Practices: Three Level of Specification

The approach to school-level leadership outlined in the OLF does not align itself with any specific leadership model or theory. While leadership models and theories provide a conceptual coherence which can assist in building understanding, no existing individual theory or model captures a sufficient proportion of what leaders actually do to serve the purposes intended for the OLF. That said, the OLF does reflect most of the practices found in current models of both "instructional" and "transformational" leadership. Using a term that has become common in the educational leadership literature, it is an "integrated" model (for example, see Printy et al. 2010; Robinson et al. 2009) although a more fully developed one than appears in most the literature to date. This integrated model aims to capture the relatively direct efforts of successful leaders to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools (the primary focus of instructional leadership models), as well as their efforts to create organizational conditions which enable and support those improvement efforts (the primary focus of transformational leadership models).

As Table 3.1 indicates, the OLF consists of five domains of practices and each of these domains includes a handful of more specific practices. The 21 more specific practices are closely aligned to evidence about successful leadership whereas the domains are best thought of as conceptual organizers that aid framework users' sense-making and memory. In addition, each of the 21 specific practices is further

Table 3.1 What successful school leaders do

Domains of practice	Successful leadership practices
Set directions	Build a shared vision
	Identify specific, shared, short-term goals
	Create high-performance expectations
	Communicate the vision and goals
Build relationships and develop people	Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff
	Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members
	Model the school's values and practices
	Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents
	Establish productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives
Develop the organization to support desired practices	Build collaborative cultures and distribute leadership
	Structure the organization to facilitate collaboration
	Build productive relationships with families and communities.
	Connect the school to its wider environment.
	Maintain a safe and healthy school environment
	Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals
Improve the instructional program	Staff the instructional program
	Provide instructional support.
	Monitor student learning and school improvement progress
	Buffer staff from distractions to their work
Secure accountability	Build staff members' sense of internal accountability
	Meet the demands for external accountability

illustrated, as in Table 3.2, using just two of the leadership practices. This level of specification is described for all 21 leadership practices in the OLF itself.

One of the more complex challenges facing those developing leadership frameworks and standards is to determine the appropriate level of specification. Where is the “sweet spot” between a level of specification that generalizes to almost all leaders’ and their circumstances (e.g., all elementary and secondary school principals in a state or province) and one that is relevant for only one set of leaders and their circumstances (secondary school department heads working with urban students from economically disadvantaged families)?

Framework developers are rarely explicit about how they address this challenge and there is no formula to help. The recently revised U.S. standards (NPBEA 2015) include two levels of specification, for example, whereas the OLF includes three levels: domains of practice, successful leadership practices associated with each domain, and illustrations of how to use each of the successful leadership practices. Settling on three levels for the OLF was simply a matter of responding to many

Table 3.2 From what to how: Two examples

Domain	What	How
Set directions	<i>Build a shared vision</i>	Establish, with staff, students and other stakeholders, an overall sense of purpose or vision for work in their schools to which they are all strongly committed;
		Build understanding of the specific implications of the schools' vision for its' programs and the nature of classroom instruction;
		Encourage the development of organizational norms that support openness to change in the direction of that purpose or vision;
		Help staff and other stakeholders to understand the relationship between their schools' vision and board and provincial policy initiatives and priorities.
Build relations & develop people	<i>Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff</i>	Encourage staff to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with students and how they are doing it;
		Lead discussions about the relative merits of current and alternative practices
		Challenge staff to re-examine the extent to which their practices contribute to the learning and well-being of all of their students;
		Facilitate opportunities for staff to learn from each other;
		Are a source of new ideas for staff learning;
		Encourage staff to pursue their own goals for professional learning;
		Encourage staff to develop and review their own professional growth goals and their relationship to school goals and priorities;
Encourage staff to try new practices consistent with their own interests.		

rounds of feedback. This was feedback provided during the framework development process from practicing leaders and those who worked with them, about the need for greater clarity about what each practice entailed “on the ground”.

3.2.1 Domains of Practice

The first level of specification describes domains or categories which encompass underlying theories or explanation for why the described leadership practices are successful. In addition to offering a conceptual explanation for successful leadership practices, identification of domains makes a framework memorable and adds

considerable meaning to the framework for those who are its intended users. For most of these purposes, whether or not the domains can be empirically justified, as in the case of the factor analysis underlying McREL's framework (Waters and Cameron 2007), is not critical. Left at the level of 21 "responsibilities", the McCrel framework is decidedly not memorable and very difficult to make sense of.

Each of the leadership practices described in the OLF reflects one of five broad domains or categories: Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices, Improving the Instructional Program and Securing Accountability. The first three of these domains originate in two sources. One source is a corpus of empirical research accumulated over at least three decades identifying a set of practices that are core or essential across many organizational contexts and sectors (Leithwood 1994; Leithwood and Riehl 2005; Yukl 1994). The second source is what Rowan et al. (1997) describe as "Decades of research on teaching" which explains variation in teachers' contributions to student achievement (teachers' performance or P) as a function of their knowledge and skill (ability or A), their motivation (M), and the settings in which they work (S): this explanation is captured succinctly in the formula $P = f(A, M, S)$.

Both sources cited above point to key functions of leaders as assisting their teachers and other organizational colleagues to further develop their motivations (one of the primary purposes for Setting Directions) and abilities (the purpose for Building Relationships and Developing People) to accomplish organizational goals, as well as to create and sustain supportive work settings (the goal of Developing the Organization to Sustain Desired Practices). In addition, every organization has a unique "technology" for accomplishing its primary purposes and the fourth domain of practices included in the OLF, Improving the Instructional Program, reflects that "technology" for schools (teaching and learning). Finally, the fifth domain of OLF, Securing Accountability, is justified by the policy context in which contemporary public schooling finds itself, one which places unprecedented demands on leaders to publicly demonstrate the progress being made toward accomplishing the purposes established for their organizations.

3.2.2 Leadership Practices and How They Are Enacted

The second level of specification, appearing in the left column of Table 3.1, describes successful leadership practices within each of the five domain at, or close to, the detail used in the research identifying each of the practices. At this level, fidelity to the relevant empirical research is paramount. OLF's claim to be evidence-based is largely justified by the explicit nature of the links it makes between high-quality empirical evidence and each of the 21 successful leadership practices. For an explicit discussion of these links, see the original OLF document (Leithwood 2012).

The third level of specification, illustrated in Table 3.2 (and fully described in the OLF itself), outlines how each of the successful leadership practices could be enacted in some relevant context. Evidence for these illustrative enactments can be

found in much of the qualitative educational leadership literature. The shift from “what” leaders do to “how” they do it, however, is much less distinct than such language seems to suggest. Every attempt to describe a leadership practice might be carried out could be followed by a request for ever more detail prompted by variation in leaders’ contexts; one person’s “how” is another person’s “what”. The value of OLF practices depends, finally, on leaders enacting the practices in ways that are sensitive to the specific features of the settings in which they work, the people with whom they are working and changes over time. So the OLF stops at three levels of specification arguing that those using the OLF are expected to bring considerable local knowledge and problem-solving expertise to the enactment of the successful leadership practices. This expectation acknowledges the necessarily contingent nature of leaders’ work in the dynamic environments of schools.

3.3 Leaders’ Personal Qualities

In addition to successful leadership practices, as summarized in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, the OLF includes a small but critical number of personal resources or qualities which leaders draw on as they enact effective leadership practices and which, in turn, are shaped by those enactment experiences. Considered together, these resources substantially overlap some of the leadership “traits” which preoccupied early leadership research and which lately have proven to be powerful explanations for leaders’ success. Leadership traits have been defined broadly as relatively stable and coherent integrations of personal characteristics that foster a consistent pattern of leadership performance across a variety of group and organizational situations”.

While many traits or personal characteristics have been associated with leaders and leadership (e.g., Zaccaro et al. 2004), the OLF includes only those for which there is compelling empirical evidence suggesting that they are instrumental to leadership success. Entitled “personal leadership resources” in the OLF (and often referred to by Ontario leaders now as “PLRs”), they are of three types— cognitive, social and psychological as summarized in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 OLF’s personal leadership resources

Cognitive resources	Problem-solving expertise
	Domain-specific knowledge
Social resources	Perceiving emotions
	Managing emotions
	Acting in emotionally appropriate ways
Psychological resources	Optimism
	Self-efficacy
	Resilience
	Proactivity

3.4 Cognitive Resources

Considerable evidence collected over many decades suggests that leaders' effectiveness is partly explained by intelligence and experience. This would only be surprising if it was not the case, although some early evidence indicates that stressful and hectic environments (features of environments in which school leaders often find themselves) reduce the advantage of greater intelligence to near zero. Intelligence and experience, however, are "surface" traits of leaders offering little guidance to those selecting and developing leaders or to leaders and aspiring leaders themselves. Below the surface of what is typically referred to as leader's intelligence are problem-solving capacities and below the surface of "experience" is the "domain-specific" knowledge useful for such problem solving; the OLF includes both as "cognitive resources".

Problem-Solving Expertise The literature on expert problem solving processes includes some variation in component processes or skills. For example, one approach, based on research with school leaders (Leithwood and Steinbach 1995), includes such processes as problem interpretation, goal setting, weighing principles and values, clarifying constraints, developing solution processes and controlling one's mood (expertise within these processes is described in the OLF). Another approach, based on research largely in non-school sectors (Mumford et al. 2006), includes similar though fewer processes including identifying the causes of the problem, determining the resources available to solve the problem, diagnosing the restrictions on one's choice of actions, and clarifying contingencies.

Evidence about problem solving highlighted in the OLF is primarily concerned with how leaders solve "unstructured" problems, the non-routine problems requiring significantly more than the application of existing know-how, or what is sometimes referred to as "adaptive leadership". Results of this research offer powerful guidelines for how to deal productively with the truly thorny challenges faced by those exercising leadership.

Knowledge About Learning Conditions with Direct Effects on Student Learning Because school leaders' influence on student learning is largely indirect (a well-documented assumption of the OLF), knowledge about learning conditions with significant effects on students that can be influenced by school leaders is an extremely important aspect of what leaders need to know. Indeed, "leadership for learning" can be described relatively simply, but accurately, as the process of (a) diagnosing the status of potentially powerful learning conditions in the school and classroom, (b) selecting those learning conditions most likely to be constraining student learning in one's school, and (c) improving the status of those learning conditions. This book synthesizes a considerable amount of evidence about such learning conditions on each of four "paths" and reflects many of the variables identified by Hattie (2009).

3.4.1 Social Resources

The importance attached to leaders' social resources has a long history. Early efforts to theorize leadership carried out at Ohio and Michigan State universities in the 1950s and 1960s situated relationship building among the two or three most important dimensions of effective leadership. More recently, Goleman has claimed that empathy "represents the foundation skill for all social competencies important for work" (Salfi 2011, p. 819). Transformational leadership theory includes a focus on "individualized consideration" and leader-member exchange theory (Erdogan and Liden 2002) argues that leadership effectiveness depends on building differentiated relationships with each of one's colleagues, relationships that reflect their individual needs, desires and capacities.

Social resources encompass the leader's ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of persons, including oneself, in interpersonal situations and to act appropriately on that understanding. The three sets of social resources included in the OLF (summarized in Table 3.3) are perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting productively in response to their own and others' emotions. Enacting these social resources helps build a positive emotional climate in the school, an important mediator of leaders' impacts on the performance of their organizations (e.g., Menges et al. 2011).

Perceiving Emotions includes the ability to detect, from a wide array of clues, one's own emotions (self-awareness) and the emotions of others. People with this social resource are able to recognize their own emotional responses and how those emotional responses shape their focus of attention and influence their actions. They are also able to discern the emotions being experienced by others, for example, from their tone of voice, facial expressions, body language and other verbal and non-verbal information.

Managing Emotions includes managing one's own and others' emotions, including the interaction of emotions on the part of different people in pairs and groups. People with this relational resources are able to understand the reasons for their own "intuitive" emotional responses and are able to reflect on the potential consequences of those responses; they are also able to persuade others to be more reflective about their own "intuitive" emotional responses and to reflect on the potential consequences of those responses.

Acting in Emotionally Appropriate Ways entails the ability to respond to the emotions of others in ways that support the purposes for the interaction. This social resource allows leaders to exercise a high level of cognitive control over which emotions are allowed to guide their actions and to assist others to act on emotions most likely to best serve their interests.

3.4.2 Psychological Resources

The three psychological resources included in the OLF are optimism, self-efficacy and resilience. While evidence suggests that each of these resources make significant contributions to leadership initiatives responsible for risk-taking and eventual

success (e.g., Avey et al. 2008), a recent line of theory and research argues that when the three resources act in synergy, that is, when one person possesses all three resources, they make an especially large contribution to leadership success.

Optimism is the habitual expectation of success in one's efforts to address challenges and confront change now and in the future. Optimistic leaders habitually expect good things to result from their initiatives while pessimistic leaders habitually assume that their efforts will be thwarted, as often as not. When the expectations of optimistic leaders are not met, they pursue alternative paths to accomplish their goals. Optimistic leaders expect their efforts to be successful in relation to those things over which they have direct influence or control but not necessarily to be powerful enough to overcome negative forces in their organizations over which they have little or no influence or control; they are realistic as well as optimistic. Optimistic leaders are likely to take initiative and responsible risks with positive expectations regardless of past problems or setbacks.

Self efficacy is a belief about one's own ability to perform a task or achieve a goal. It is a belief about ability, not actual ability. That is, efficacious leaders believe they have the ability to solve whatever challenges, hurdles or problems that might come their way in their efforts to help their organizations succeed. Self-efficacy beliefs contribute to leaders' success through their directive effects on leaders' choices of activities and settings and can affect coping efforts once those activities are begun. Efficacy beliefs determine how much risk people will take, how much effort they will expend and how long they will persist in the face of failure or difficulty. The stronger the self-efficacy the longer the persistence. Leadership self-efficacy or confidence, it has been claimed, is likely the key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment and has a very strong relationship with a leaders' performance.

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. Resilience is significantly assisted by high levels of efficacy but goes beyond the belief in one's capacity to achieve in the long run. At the core of resilience is the ability to "bounce back" from failure and even move beyond one's initial goals while doing so. Resilient leaders or potential leaders have the ability to thrive in the challenging circumstances commonly encountered by school leaders.

3.5 Conclusion

The purpose for this chapter was to provide a relatively comprehensive account of leadership practices that considerable amounts of evidence suggest have the potential to improve the status of conditions or variables on each of the four paths serving as the focus for this book. As Hitt and Tucker's (2016) comparative analysis indicates, while the OLF does not include all of the practices found in two other comparably evidence-based frameworks, it does include most of them. It seems safe to conclude, then, that improving the status of specific variables on each of the four paths described in this book may well demand unique responses by leaders. However, these responses are likely to be variants on the dimensions and practices outlined in the OLF.

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