

# CATHOLIC LEADERS MATTER

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The habits that produce significant change in teaching and learning begin with significant change in what leaders think, say and do. The implications of this are profound. It means, for instance, that Catholic leaders begin reform efforts by changing themselves before considering how others must change. It means that Catholic leaders carefully examine how their own assumptions, their own understanding of significant issues and their own behaviours may be preserving current practices. It also means that Catholic leaders take on the intentional and disciplined process of changing professional habits that may be both ineffectual and deeply ingrained. In addition, it requires exposure and risk because new learning will often be public in nature and, like all learning of consequence, may sometimes lead to failure. As a Catholic leader, one must develop a style of leadership that is collaborative and which exercises authority in a loving manner, with an eye to facilitate change and provide direction towards the common good.

Those who explore the topic of leadership will soon find a consistent theme; leaders must focus on and accept responsibility for results. Yet data is not what drives educators to change or improve. The increasing emphasis on measuring results using provincial tests has led some school leaders to focus solely on raising test scores.

However, appeals to improve test scores are unlikely to generate the enthusiasm and commitment needed to sustain a school improvement effort. Most educators will not be inspired to expend greater effort or explore new strategies in the hope of raising test scores by five per cent.

As Catholic leaders, what do we need to consider that will support school improvement processes that make a difference? Perhaps more than ever, we need leaders who can help create a culture of success by establishing processes to help all teachers clarify a reasonable number of essential learning outcomes and to provide each with timely, relevant information on how their students' mastery of those outcomes compares with the achievement of similar students. We need leaders who will help schools establish specific, measurable, results-oriented goals and who help each teacher and team understand how they collectively contribute to those goals. We need leaders who plan for (rather than hope for) small wins and who celebrate the successes of individual teachers, teams of teachers and the entire Catholic school community while going through the *Teaching Learning Critical Pathway* process in very public ways. We need Catholic leaders who tear down the walls of isolation and build a collaborative culture

based on teams whose members work together interdependently to achieve common goals for the common good and most specifically for our weakest students.

Above all, we need Catholic leaders who remind us of the moral purpose of our profession. The very nature of our profession, as a Catholic vocation calls upon us to devote ourselves to making a difference in the lives of others. Catholic leaders would demonstrate a deep sense of justice and in the spirit of the Gospel, reach out to those who are struggling to cope, who do not feel they fully belong and who find involvement in the school difficult for whatever reason. The success or failure of our efforts will affect the aspirations, opportunities and quality of life for all our students.

As we consider Catholic school communities that are making a difference, we must reflect upon these questions.

- Are we as Catholic leaders stressing ministry and service; consultation and consensus being highly valued?
- Is the ease of building relationships under the *Catholic Leadership Framework* characterized by mutual trust and openness to new ideas, a tolerance of mistakes and an acceptance of an individual's strengths and weaknesses?
- Are we organizing our staffs into collaborative teams that are given time during the day to work together in pursuit of common goals?
- Are we setting aside portions of our staff meetings to celebrate the efforts and achievements of individuals and teams, and reviewing indicators of the progress the school is making in achieving its goals?
- Are we viewing professional learning as manifesting that which is present but not apparent; a significant change in perspective from a conveying-the-information-through-presentations approach to staff development?
- Are we creating a culture of success, collaboration and moral purpose where every staff member believes his or her efforts can be noted, appreciated and celebrated by the Catholic school community?

It is one thing to know the practices and structures of a successful school (e.g. a common vision of good teaching, use of data to focus on student results) and another to mobilize staff commitment and capacity to make them operate well. The stronger the Catholic community, the more collaborative the leadership, the more reflective the culture, the more likely it is that communities will be true to their mission.

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