Ever-Ready Leadership:
Dealing with Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity

Education leaders operate in a VUCA world—one characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. And they currently face the most disruptive period in education history with a pandemic, economic problems, social justice issues and rapid technological changes all at the forefront. Add to that scenario a polarized country rife with widespread misinformation and mistrust. The end of the pandemic will not be the end of these problems. It is no wonder then that John Kim, a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School states that *"Running a school district is one of the toughest, most complex jobs in America"* [1]

High-stakes decision making and changing conditions present challenges that exert pressure on any system. These challenges either elevate the performance of leadership teams or expose their fault lines. So why are some teams more adept at navigating tough situations? Predictably, those already possessing strong skills are more successful in high-stakes situations than those without.

But how do we prepare ourselves and others to face the challenges of a VUCA world? Fortunately, we don't need to predict the future in order to prepare people and systems to successfully face unforeseen challenges. Ever-ready leadership can handle whatever comes their way.

| V Volatility |
| U Uncertainty |
| C Complexity |
| A Ambiguity |

Hallmarks of Ever-Ready Leadership

Ever-ready leadership is having the capacity—individually and collectively—to effectively navigate a changing, challenging environment—addressing crises and high-stakes situations while still achieving key goals.

Several hallmarks distinguish ever-ready leaders from others:

Ever-Ready Leaders	Never-Ready Leaders
Proactively identify threats and opportunities allowing for early action and resolution	Are often surprised or overwhelmed by avoidable problems; opportunities are missed
Use a purposeful, intentional approach for excellent outcomes	Use a scattershot, reactionary approach wasting time and resources and perhaps leaving problems unfixed
Rely on data, information, and input	Over-rely on their own judgment or "gut feel"
Juggle multiple priorities, making progress on several fronts	Fixate on one priority while others languish
Recognize complex issues often require complex, multi-faceted solutions	Seek "silver bullet"/too-good-to-be-true/quick fixes to complicated problems
Communicate and involve stakeholders in multiple ways; Initiatives have support	Limit communication and stakeholder involvement increasing opposition and mistrust
Value results—solutions implemented with planning and fidelity	Favor action and activity over planning; initiatives wane once new priorities arise
Apply lessons learned for better outcomes	Rarely reflect, resulting in repeated mistakes
Ensure culture and climate support district goals, values, and people	Disregard significance of district or school culture

Having ever-ready leaders means your district or organization has people who are capable, agile, attuned, and clear-headed—people you can trust with the toughest issues. Ever-ready leadership provides the capacity to navigate VUCA.

The 5 P's of Ever-ready Leadership

So, what can we do to ensure our organization and people are ever-ready? Preparing our people and systems to be ready for anything takes intentional efforts in five areas:

1 **People:** *Ensure the right people are in place and have the skills they need*

Who you have on your team matters. If team members don't support expectations, or if they create unnecessary roadblocks or are otherwise a liability, it may be time to rethink team composition. John Guyer, CEO of Summit Academy Management, an Ohio-based statewide system of schools serving students with special needs, reflected on building his leadership team: *"I want leaders who embody our stated values and demonstrate them in how they treat others—otherwise those value statements just become a sign on the wall. If you can't trust each other to uphold important principles, it erodes trust and productivity."*

People also need the right skills to succeed. For greater short- and long-term results, districts should focus more on developing "soft" skills versus "hard" skills (see chart below). "Hard" skills are technical, content-specific and job-specific. They may be essential for a specific purpose, but they are more easily outdated and not as transferable. In fact, one study found that 33% of skills/knowledge needed three years ago are no longer relevant.[2]

"Soft" skills are foundational to success across jobs. They are broadly applicable, transferable, and enduring. They help us be more effective regardless of the job and, when missing, are often at the heart of skills-related job performance problems. Someone may have deep content or technical knowledge, but lack the ability to effectively communicate, work on a project team or manage their workload. A critical skills survey by the American Management Association found that managers rate employees at or below average in critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills—key skills that 75% of managers say will become increasingly important.[3]

HARD SKILLS		SOFT SKILLS	
Skills or knowledge necessary for accomplishing a specific purpose or job; often acquired through education, qualifications, certification.		Skills essential for effectiveness in most jobs; harder to quantify but noticeable when missing; often acquired through experience, coaching and application.	
Tend to be job-specific, content-oriented, easily defined and easily outdated.		Tend to be broadly applicable, process-oriented, enduring, transferable and valuable to any job.	
For example: • Familiarity with designated software, programs, platforms • Regulations/requirements	• Funding Sources • Budgeting • Performance Evaluations • Etc.	*For example:* • Communication • Problem Solving • Decision Making • Empathy	• Leadership • Collaboration • Creativity • Etc.

Investing in soft skills pays off. A University of Michigan study found that providing soft skills training yielded a return on investment of 256% and increased productivity and retention by 12%.[4] Another study found an average of $4,000 return for each $1,100 invested in developing soft skills.[5]

In education, those returns can be measured in student achievement, other student outcomes and creating change within districts and buildings. A recent Wallace Foundation study captures how essential principals are for these outcomes. It confirms that principals are second only to classroom teachers in their influence on student achievement—but that they have significant impact on every student in the school. The study reports an increase in student learning in reading and math of almost three months generated by replacing a struggling principal with one who is in the 75th percentile of effectiveness.[6]

What are we doing to help principals prepare to affect change at the building level? High-quality professional development matters—it is one thing that differentiates the world's best school systems."[7] The Wallace report states that given the critical role and effect of principals, *"it is difficult to envision an investment in K-12 education with a higher ceiling on its potential return than improving school leadership."[8]* Investing in staff members can help you prepare for looming and existing shortages of principals, teachers and other educators. Providing principals with soft skills ensures that we have ever-ready leaders prepared to successfully face and implement change in a VUCA environment.

2 **Process:** *Use a shared approach for better results*

An effective and shared problem-solving approach facilitates teamwork. It allows people to work effectively together in addressing critical issues. It can be especially valuable in the midst of turbulent times, when people may struggle to create a cohesive response to a high-stakes challenge. A shared approach removes the guesswork and serves as a roadmap for navigating in a VUCA environment.

PLANNING FOR A PIVOTAL SCHOOL YEAR

Solving Complex Problems: A 4-Step Approach

The leadership team for the York County schools in Virginia used this approach to get students back to school after a fire damaged an educational complex, and then to make decisions during the pandemic.

SITUATION APPRAISAL
- See the issues
- Clarify the issues
- Assess priorities
- Name the next steps

DECISION ANALYSIS
- State the decision
- Establish and classify criteria
- List & evaluate alternatives
- Consider risks
- Think about the best balanced choice

POTENTIAL PROBLEM ANALYSIS
- Predict what could go wrong
- List likely causes
- Agree on preventive actions
- Note contingent actions

PROBLEM ANALYSIS
- State the problem
- Organize relevant information
- Look for possible causes
- Vet possible causes
- Ensure we've found true cause

*Education*Week.

Image and icons: Getty; News Project
SOURCE: TregoED

Processes, like those created by TregoED, help districts build ever-ready leaders and realize important benefits:

- Better use of data—We may have too much, insufficient, or rapidly changing data increasing complexity. A systematic approach helps us organize and analyze the data—and determine what's missing.

- Early identification of threats and opportunities—Studies show that organizations have a 71% success rate in achieving good outcomes when problems are recognized early enough. The success rate drops significantly—to 13%—when problems are recognized later.[9]

- Better solutions and outcomes—A deliberate, well-reasoned approach increases the likelihood of good outcomes. Studies show that when situations have good outcomes, a deliberate approach was taken 63% of the time. In contrast, 97% of the time when situations turn out poorly, a reactive approach was taken.[10] A poor choice made quickly is almost always more costly than taking longer to make the right choice.

- Increased confidence in the end result—Decision-makers and others know that conclusions were made using sound logic, good data, and with stakeholder involvement.

- A solid base for effective communications—A well-structured problem-solving process lays out information, rationale, and conclusions in an organized and easily understandable way. Key points are easily identified and communicated.

- An invaluable document that can be used when a record, reminder or rationale is needed after the fact

- Increased trust, transparency, and collaboration—Courageous conversations occur when people trust the process and emotions are taken out of the equation.

Sherri Thomas, Director, Exceptional Children Division, (NC) Department of Public Instruction, explains the importance of having a common approach, *"Having a shared approach has been both critical and extremely beneficial in our efforts to involve LEAs and stakeholders from all over the state in the problem-solving process. **The common vocabulary and steps are a kind of problem-solving shorthand.** They facilitate team communication and ensure efforts are aimed in the right direction. It is so important that stakeholders are heard and involved in meaningful ways. And when you get their best thinking, you know the end result will be better."*
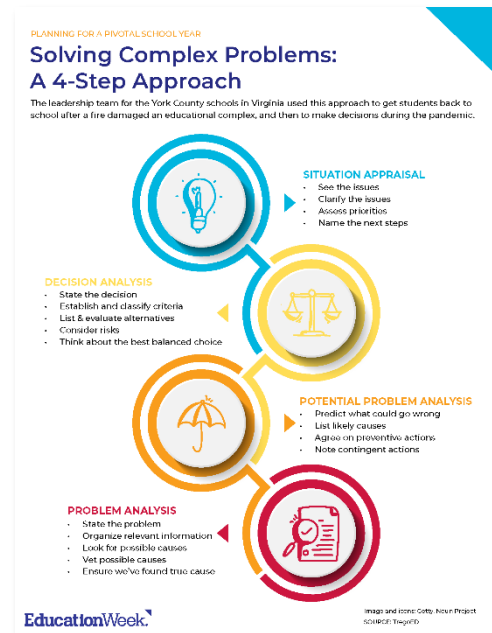
3 Purpose and goal-setting: *Provide meaning and direction*

Setting direction is an essential practice for effective leaders. One study of organizational leaders found that initiatives failed over 50% of the time because objectives were poorly defined and there was an *"inability to think through how to make them work."*[11] Having a clear purpose and defined objectives is critical in any setting, but is especially so in times of volatility and ambiguity.

Inspirational, ever-ready leaders keep the focus on *"Why are we here?"*[12] and ensure activities and initiatives support the overall mission and goals. Clear purpose and expectations provide meaning, context and direction to individuals and their responsibilities, departments and schools.

4 Practices: *The things on which culture and climate are built*

The way things are done and the way people are treated is a reflection of district culture. People watch and learn. Looking at your systems through a cultural lens can be enlightening:

> **?**
>
> *What are people learning from how your district does things?*
>
> *What does your district communicate with its actions towards employees, students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders?*
>
> *Do people know that they matter—that their input, involvement, and work is valued?*

District climate and culture can either be a help or hindrance. School culture directly contributes to teacher satisfaction (or lack thereof)—and school leadership is responsible for school culture. In fact, satisfaction with school leadership is the #1 influencer of teacher satisfaction and decisions about whether to not to continue teaching. It is even more important than salary, demographics, etc.[13]

Investing in peoples' skill and career development, is one way to show people that they matter. Director of American Management Association, Eric Rolfe Greenberg, said *"investing in employees' futures is more important than immediate compensation. Programs that improve work skills and future career development are seen as particularly effective."*[14] An IBM study found that employees are two times more likely to leave if they do not feel they're growing in their job.[15] Providing high-quality professional development will not only increase effectiveness of teachers and leaders, it is likely to improve retention.

Seeking others' input has multiple benefits—it is another way that we demonstrate that people matter to us. Involving others sends important signals about our value for others and their ideas, our trust in their judgments, and our belief in what they can contribute and accomplish. Plus, it practically guarantees better solutions and decisions than we would otherwise have. The collective judgment of many people is almost always better than the opinions of just a few—even experts.[16] And involvement increases others' commitment to solutions which is critical for successful implementation.[17] Involvement also helps us avoid the tendency to over-rely on our own intuition/gut feel. We tend to over-estimate the quality of our own judgments and over-rely on our own conclusions, intuition, or gut feelings. Paradoxically, the more knowledgeable we are, the less reliable our conclusions because we may ignore contradictory information in favor of our own conclusions.[18] Involving a range of other people helps avoid this problem.

Michael Fullan says…

"The two greatest failures of leaders are indecisiveness in times of urgent need and dead certainty that they are right in times of complexity."[19]

Vic Shandor, Superintendent of York County (VA) School Division describes how he intentionally builds the culture and collaboration of his leadership team to ensure that his staff is "ever-ready." *"You need to prepare the culture or climate of the team so that people can work effectively together under pressure. Team members should be Ok with confronting conflict and each other. Conflict needs to be addressed when it happens—in the heat of the moment, you can't afford bruised feelings. The team needs to get used to you asking a lot of questions—not because you don't trust their opinions—but as part of ensuring rigorous thinking. Helping them build trust and confidence in themselves and each other pays off under pressure."*

5 **Performance System:** *Ensure performance supports are in place*

The performance environment needs to support people in achieving desired goals. Its importance is too often overlooked. People may have the skills and desire to "do the right thing," but if the performance system punishes them for it, or makes it too difficult, you will not get desired results. Consider a principal tasked with providing "instructional leadership." *Is it clear exactly what that means and how to do it? Do other (perhaps less important) tasks, paperwork, meetings, etc. continually interfere? Does the principal receive specific, timely, balanced and actionable feedback on their instructional leadership?* Too often, systems and procedures are at a disconnect and take on a life of their own—one that is sometimes at odds with desired outcomes.

Well-constructed performance systems ensure that expectations are clear and that people have the skills and resources they need. In addition, they remove barriers to success, support desired outcomes and give people the useful timely feedback they need. When all aspects of the performance system are aligned to support desired outcomes, positive change happens more readily, easily and consistently—creating and optimizing ever-ready leadership.

Summary

Ever-ready leadership enables us to face enormous change, volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity—and navigate it more successfully. Invest time, energies, and money in developing the 5 Ps:

- have the right **people** on the team with the needed skills

- use a shared problem-solving and decision-making **process** to facilitate teamwork and better outcomes

- stay focused on the **purpose** of what we are each doing and why it's important

- have school and district **practices** that make sense and align with desired results and values

- ensure the **performance system** supports people in achieving desired outcomes.

Being ready for the future requires action today.
Research shows that giving leaders the skills they need to face high-stakes situations with confidence, clarity, and coherence minimizes the likelihood of poor outcomes and wasted time and resources. Investing in ever-ready leadership also ensures that your leadership team is prepared to handle any VUCA-related challenges that come our way. Leaders with strong soft skills are leaders that are capable of moving districts forward in many areas under any circumstances.

Endnotes

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