

# Leading Education through Relational Leadership

*Professional learning for contemporary leaders*

The Department of Education at Swinburne University of Technology is proud to present the first edition of our professional microlearning series.

Written for busy educators, our series explores educational leadership from a different perspective. Designed to respond to the contemporary education landscape, we have drawn on behavioural neuroscience to develop timely and relevant professional learning.

Focussed on cultivating relational educational leaders, our microlearning series is designed to offer practical strategies that can be applied immediately in any school setting.



## In this Edition:

***Leadership of Self***

***Developing leadership through resilience and self-compassion***

### ■ ***Leadership of Self: The Foundation of Relational Leadership***

When we think about successful leaders, we often focus on how well they lead others. This is true, but relational leaders understand that before you can lead others, you need to lead yourself (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Leadership of self means to understand your own behaviours, habits and thought processes as the foundation for developing authentic and successful leadership practices. It also means taking responsibility for your own growth and awareness.

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*The Education Department at Swinburne University of Technology is proud to announce the first in a series of four master classes. Each master class will explore research-backed methods for strengthening leadership capabilities through deeper self-awareness, enhanced resilience and structured reflective and relational practices.*

***See the back page for information on how to register your place.***

# Leading with Self-Compassion

## What is self-compassion?

Self-compassion as comprising three core elements: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification with emotions. (Neff & Germer, 2018)

## Developing Leadership Through Resilience and Self-Compassion

Building upon relational leadership practices on Leadership of Self, resilience and self-compassion are essential for educational leaders who want to develop sustainable leadership practices. Resilience and self-compassion are transformative tools that develop the 'people leadership' skills and accumen required to lead in current school environments.

## Developing Leadership Through Resilience and Self-Compassion

Resilience in leadership refers to the capacity to withstand, recover from, and adapt to challenges, setbacks, and stress. For educational leaders, resilience involves maintaining mental and physical wellbeing despite the inherent pressures of their roles. Resilient leaders exhibit greater adaptability, problem-solving capabilities, and emotional stability during periods of organisational change and uncertainty (Day and Schmidt, 2007). The development of resilience connects intimately with leadership of

self. When leaders understand their emotional responses and behavioural patterns, they can cultivate specific resilience strategies suited to their individual needs.

## Self-Compassion as Leadership Practice

Self-compassion encompasses three interconnected elements: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification with thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2018). While resilience addresses how leaders respond to challenges, self-compassion reflects how leaders relate to themselves in their leadership role. When educational leaders intentionally practice self-compassion, they tend to make more balanced decisions, avoiding both excessive self-criticism and unrealistic self-assessments. Self-compassionate leaders also model healthy responses to setbacks, creating workplace cultures where learning from mistakes becomes normalised rather than stigmatised. Perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate greater sustainability in their leadership practice, experiencing lower burnout rates and higher job satisfaction.

The connection between self-compassion and leadership of self becomes evident when considering how self-compassion enhances self-knowledge. A balanced approach to self-reflection encourages relational leadership by creating psychological safety with self and others, leading to successful leadership practices (Brown, 2018).

## Strategies for Building Resilience in Educational Leadership

Research shows that leaders who model healthy work habits - like setting time boundaries - have significantly more impact that is transformative in educational settings. But how is this possible in a busy school?

### ■ Get creative with your calendar

Block times in your calendar for responding to emails - and only do this once a day. Try to check email at the start of your day only, as checking your inbox all day takes your focus away from deep work.

### ■ Block time for deep work:

Even if it's only 30 minutes a day, block time in your diary for focused and uninterrupted work. Make sure to tell your colleagues so they are aware of when and why they can't reach you.

### ■ Schedule breaks and nutrition

We don't expect our students to not take a break or eat all day - so why do we do this as leaders? The day easily gets away from us, so schedule a break to make sure you get time to refuel and re-energise. Your brain will thank you for it!

### ■ Train Your Brain!

Neuroscience research tells us that our brains possess remarkable neuroplasticity. Reflective practice strengthens the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala and enable more effective emotional regulation during stressful situations



For anyone working in education today, developing self-leadership skills is **essential for navigating the complex human relationships** that make up our schools and educational organisations.

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**Contemporary leaders** don't see leadership as having power over others. Instead, they are committed to modelling relational leadership through the development of professional relationships in the workplace. Relational leaders prioritise the development of human connection between people, and this is strengthened over time across many interactions and conversations (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

**To lead yourself** means knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, understanding your emotions and how to manage them, being aware of your values and beliefs, recognising how your actions affect others, and taking responsibility for your own growth and learning. When you understand yourself better, you can build stronger connections with others, which is what relational leadership is all about.

### **How to lead yourself towards more satisfying leadership**

- **Self-awareness** means knowing who you are - your strengths, your struggles, your values, and how you typically respond to situations. Leaders who understand themselves create better working environments. For example, an educational leader who tends to avoid conflict might work specifically on developing skills to address problems directly, rather than letting issues with their staff grow by ignoring them.
- **Self-reflexivity goes** beyond just knowing yourself, leadership of self involves regularly examining your assumptions and beliefs. A department leader might ask themselves: "Why did I react so strongly in that meeting? What assumptions am I making about this situation?"
- **Self-leadership** modelled by reflexive educational leaders enables them to become more flexible, build better relationships, and handle challenges more effectively (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). For example, a deputy principal who recognises that they tend to make quick decisions under pressure can intentionally slow down when facing important choices and seek input from others before finalising decisions.

Relational leadership isn't just something you do - it's a way of being with others to create positive cultural change (Raelin, 2016). By developing self-awareness, authenticity, reflective thinking, and emotional management, any leader can build a foundation for meaningful relationships in the workplace.

### **Resilience practices to try**

- Maintaining perspective during setbacks by **framing challenges as learning opportunities** rather than permanent obstacles represents a key resilience practice.
- Developing strong professional networks that provide both emotional and practical support helps educational leaders sustain their effectiveness even during difficult periods.



*Relational leadership is a **way of being** with others.*

*The Education Department at Swinburne University of Technology invites you to the first in a series of leadership master classes.*

## Master class 1: Leadership of Self



### ■ In-Person Master class

Thursday 1 May

4pm - 6pm

*Networking with finger food and drinks from 6pm - 7pm*

### ■ Location

Hawthorn Hotel  
481 Burwood Rd,  
Hawthorn 3122

### ■ Online Event:

Wednesday 30 April

4pm - 6pm

### ■ Register

Scan or click on the QR code below to reserve your complimentary ticket.



We are excited to announce the first in a series of four exclusive master classes.

Our inaugural masterclass will be facilitated by Polly Flanagan. Polly is a highly experienced educator who has taught in government, Catholic and Independent schools. She has held a number of leadership positions including 10 years as a Principal. Polly is passionate about promoting educational leadership as the key ingredient in successful schools and we are thrilled to have her launch our master class series.

The master class will explore Leadership of Self through powerful lived experiences alongside evidence-based approaches. Polly will discuss how she developed her leadership capacity by developing deeper self-awareness, building sustainable resilience, and mastering structured reflective practices.

The master class will explore:

- The art and science of behavioural change
- Practical strategies for developing self-awareness as educational leaders
- Approaches to building personal resilience in complex educational environments
- Reflective practices that enhance authenticity and effectiveness in leadership roles

We are also offering this master class online for those who can't make the in-person networking event. Please register using the QR code and the link to the live stream will be sent to you on the day of the event.

We look forward to welcoming you to our first educational leadership master class.

### In the next Edition:

***Leadership of Teams:  
Communicating for maximum effect, including negotiating  
and mastering conflict at work***