ACEL
Inspiring Educational Leaders

Australian Council for
Educational Leaders

Bold Leader Toolkit

Bold leadership starts with one brave step.

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At the start of a new school year, leaders face both fresh opportunities and familiar challenges. This ACEL toolkit is designed to walk beside you as you set the tone, shape culture, and take courageous steps forward. Inside, you'll find practical activities, reflective questions, and evidence-based strategies to strengthen your leadership and inspire bold practice in your teams. As part of ACEL's evolving suite of free resources, this guide signals our commitment to equipping every leader with the tools they need to thrive.

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How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to support school leaders to begin the year with clarity, courage and focus. It can be used independently, with a leadership team, or as part of professional reflection and coaching.

Recommended time investment

- 20–30 minutes to complete the self-assessment and read the summaries
- 5 minutes per week to revisit your plan and track micro-brave actions
- 15–20 minutes per month to review progress and adjust goals

Suggested sequence

1. Start with the Courage Gap Self-Assessment — identify strengths and areas of opportunity.
2. Read the three summaries — use the reflection prompts at the end of each summary to deepen insight.
3. Set your Bold Leadership focus — choose one key area to work on over the first 90 days.
4. Use the 30–60–90 Day Plan template — translate intentions into action across self, team, culture and community.

Best ways to use this toolkit

As a personal reflective guide for the first term

As a leadership team planning tool to set culture and priorities

As a coaching tool to support courageous leadership conversations

As a staff culture tool to normalise purposeful risk-taking and learning

A reminder: Bold leader ship isn't a single brave moment –
it is a pattern of purpose-driven actions taken consistently over time.

Self-Assessment Tool: Courageous Leadership Reflection

Reflect on each question and rate yourself (1 = Not yet true, 5 = Consistently true).

1. **I make decisions based on student need—even when those decisions may cause discomfort or opposition.**

Rating: ___ /5

2. **I address difficult conversations promptly rather than delaying them.**

Rating: ___ /5

3. **I challenge practices that no longer serve student learning, even if they are long-standing traditions.**

Rating: ___ /5

4. **I model vulnerability by acknowledging mistakes and sharing my learning process with my team.**

Rating: ___ /5

5. **I actively work to build psychological safety, so staff feel safe raising concerns or new ideas.**

Rating: ___ /5

6. **I advocate for students and staff even when doing so is politically or personally risky.**

Rating: ___ /5

7. **I consistently align my leadership actions with my stated values and school vision.**

Rating: ___ /5

Where fear or discomfort currently holds me back: _____

Small micro-brave action I will take this week: _____

One courageous decision I commit to making this term: _____

On the next pages are three summaries of well-known texts about bold, courageous leadership. At the end of each summary, reflect for a moment and then commit insight to action using our acronym ACT: Action Changes Things.

What is one small, courageous action I will take?

Summary – Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity Kim Scott (2017), St. Martin's Press.

Core Premise

Bold leadership is built through courageous relationships. In *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott argues that the most effective leaders combine **deep respect and care for people** with **clear, direct feedback and high expectations**. Leadership fails when we avoid hard conversations, soften feedback to keep the peace, or confuse kindness with clarity. Courageous leaders close this gap by being honest **because** they care.

Why It Matters

In schools, leadership is relational — and culture is shaped by the conversations we avoid or engage in. Radical Candor matters because it provides a practical framework for leading teams where:

- teaching quality, consistency, and student outcomes depend on honest dialogue
- staff wellbeing must coexist with high expectations
- leaders must build trust while addressing under-performance or resistance
- leadership credibility is shaped by timely feedback and follow-through

It reminds leaders that clarity is not harshness — it is a form of respect.

Key Principles

1. **Care Personally:** Strong leadership begins with trust. Leaders build strong relationships by knowing people, valuing their wellbeing, listening deeply, and demonstrating genuine respect.
2. **Challenge Directly:** Courageous leaders give feedback early and clearly. They don't avoid discomfort or delay action — they address issues before they grow into resentment or inconsistency.
3. **Avoid the "Ruinous Empathy" Trap:** Many leaders fall into "nice leadership": protecting feelings at the expense of growth. Scott argues that avoiding direct feedback is not kindness — it is a failure of leadership responsibility.
4. **Build a Culture of Feedback:** Radical Candor is not a one-off leadership style — it becomes cultural when feedback is normalised, reciprocal, and grounded in trust and improvement.

Leadership Implications

Bold leaders use courage in conversations to build strong teams. This means:

- giving feedback early rather than waiting for performance issues to escalate
- naming expectations clearly and consistently
- holding people to high standards while also offering support
- modelling courageous honesty with warmth and dignity
- recognising that "being liked" cannot drive leadership decisions

Bottom Line

Bold leadership is relational courage: caring personally while challenging directly. When leaders normalise clear, respectful feedback and hold high expectations with compassion, they strengthen culture, lift practice, and protect outcomes for students.

ACT: Action Changes Things: What is one small, courageous action I can take?

Summary of THE COURAGE GAP: 5 Steps to Braver Action by Margie Warrell (2025). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Core Premise

The Courage Gap describes the space between knowing what we should do and actually doing it. Fear, self-doubt, and risk aversion widen this gap, preventing individuals and leaders from taking bold action. Warrell reframes courage as a learnable skill and presents a practical five-step framework to help people act despite fear.

Why It Matters

Unaddressed fear leads to missed opportunities, stalled innovation, and diminished leadership impact. In organisations and schools, hesitation can slow decision-making, suppress new ideas, and reinforce the status quo. Closing the courage gap enables growth, resilience, adaptability, and meaningful progress.

Key Principles

1. **Focus** on what you want, not what you fear.
2. **Rescript** limiting narratives that encourage playing safe.
3. **Breathe** in courage by managing physical and emotional fear responses.
4. **Step** into discomfort as a pathway to growth.
5. **Find** the treasure when you trip, by learning from setbacks.

Leadership Implications

Leaders who close their own courage gaps model brave decision-making and psychological safety. They act decisively, invite candour, encourage experimentation, and normalise learning from mistakes. Small, repeated acts of bravery build confidence and momentum over time.

Bottom Line

The courage gap limits potential wherever fear overrides intention. Closing this gap enables leaders and individuals to move from hesitation to action, from safety to growth, and from intention to meaningful impact.

ACT: Action Changes Things: What is one small, courageous action I can take?

Summary of THE INNOVATOR'S MINDSET: Empower learning, unleash talent, and lead a culture of creativity by George Couros, Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc. 2016.

Core Premise

The Innovator's Mindset argues that innovation in education is not about technology or flashy initiatives—it is about a way of thinking that empowers students and educators to take risks, adapt, and create new solutions. Couros defines the innovator's mindset as the belief that abilities, intelligence, and talents are developed through curiosity, iteration, and a willingness to experiment.

Why It Matters

Schools often prioritize compliance, efficiency, and maintaining the status quo. Couros challenges leaders and teachers to design learning environments that foster creativity, ownership, and deep engagement—mirroring the real-world conditions students will face.

Key Principles

1. **Empower Learning**: Shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred models where students have voice, choice, and agency.
2. **Create a Culture of Innovation:** Leaders model risk-taking, encourage experimentation, and treat mistakes as learning.
3. **Embrace Change:** Innovation requires adapting to new contexts, tools, and ideas rather than defending old practices.
4. **Make Learning Relevant and Meaningful:** Authentic tasks, real problems, and community connections accelerate deep learning.
5. **Focus on Relationships:** Strong relationships fuel trust, collaboration, and psychological safety—preconditions for innovation.
6. **Observe, Reflect, Iterate:** Continuous improvement is driven by feedback loops, reflection, and willingness to revise practices.

Leadership Implications

- Leaders must model the mindset before expecting it from staff.
- Innovation thrives when leaders remove barriers, encourage autonomy, and provide time and resources for experimentation.
- Celebrating small wins builds momentum and shifts culture over time.

Bottom Line

Innovation is not a program—it's a culture. The innovator's mindset empowers educators to create learning experiences that prepare students for a rapidly changing world. It calls for bold, reflective, relationship-centred leadership that nurtures creativity, resilience, and continuous growth.

ACT: Action Changes Things: What is one small, courageous action I can take?

My 30–60–90 Day Plan

First 30 Days: Build Courage Foundations

- Launch micro-brave actions
- Begin one necessary conversation each week
- Articulate the school's purpose and link decisions directly to it
- Share at least one personal vulnerability moment

Days 1–30: Setting the Foundation

- **Focus:** Purpose, trust, and tone-setting
- **Leadership stance:** *Clarity over comfort*

1 Individual Leadership

Key Actions

- Clarify and write your personal leadership purpose and values.
- Identify your most common courage gaps (e.g. avoidance, delay, people-pleasing).
- Commit to at least one micro-brave action each week.
- Model vulnerability by naming a learning goal or leadership challenge publicly.

Reflection Prompts

- Where does fear most often influence my leadership decisions?
- What discomfort am I willing to tolerate for student benefit this term?

2 Team & Staff Culture

Key Actions

- Set clear expectations for professional culture (feedback, learning, accountability).
- Introduce shared language around courage, risk-taking, and learning from failure.
- Facilitate a Start–Stop–Continue conversation focused on teaching and learning.
- Identify informal leaders and enlist them as culture shapers who can positively influence the team.

Reflection Prompts

- What behaviours am I actively rewarding — comfort or courage?
- Where do teams need greater clarity or challenge?

3 School Culture & Systems

Key Actions

- Review existing routines, meetings, and initiatives through a "value vs impact" lens.
- Courageously pause or stop low-impact practices.
- Conduct learning walks with a focus on engagement, equity, and student voice.
- Name 1–2 outdated norms that no longer serve teachers or students.

Reflection Prompts

- Which systems exist because of tradition rather than effectiveness?
- Where could simplifying create space for better learning?

4 Community & Relationships

Key Actions

- Reaffirm the school's purpose and expectations with families.
- Use clear, values-based communication to explain priorities for the year.
- Proactively engage families likely to experience change most acutely.
- Set consistent boundaries around behaviour, learning, and partnership.

Reflection Prompts

- Where might I need to be clearer or braver in community messaging?
- How am I balancing empathy with high expectations?

At the end of my 30 days, what are the attitudes and actions I might start, stop or continue?

Start	Stop	Continue

My 30–60–90 Day Plan

Days 31–60: Building Momentum: Expand Courage Capacity

- Initiate a strategic risk-taking project
- Debrief failures openly
- Train teams in courageous conversations
- Reduce initiative clutter (courageous prioritisation)

- **Focus:** Consistency, capability, and courage in action
- **Leadership stance:** *Action builds confidence*

1 Individual Leadership

Key Actions

- Review and track micro-brave actions weekly.
- Initiate at least one difficult but necessary conversation.
- Seek feedback from a trusted colleague or mentor.
- Revisit your leadership purpose and recalibrate if needed.

Reflection Prompts

- How has action changed my confidence?
- What fears have reduced as a result of courageous action?

2 Team & Staff Culture

Key Actions

- Introduce structured feedback cycles for staff and teams.
- Support staff to trial new strategies or innovations.
- Publicly recognise examples of courage and growth.
- Normalise reflection on what didn't work — without blame.

Reflection Prompts

- Where is psychological safety increasing?
- Which teams are leaning into innovation — and why?

3 School Culture & Systems

Key Actions

- Launch a targeted improvement initiative aligned to school priorities.
- Ensure resources, time, and professional learning support the change.
- Monitor early indicators of impact (engagement, practice shifts).
- Adjust systems responsively rather than waiting for perfection.

Reflection Prompts

- What data am I willing to look at honestly?
- Where do I need to persist despite discomfort or pushback?

4 Community & Relationships

Key Actions

- Share early progress and learning with families and community.
- Address concerns directly, calmly, and consistently.
- Engage community partners where appropriate.
- Reinforce the shared responsibility for student success.

Reflection Prompts

- How is trust being built through transparency?
- Where do I need to hold firm to the school's purpose?

At the end of my 60 days, what are the attitudes and actions I might start, stop or continue?

Start	Stop	Continue

My 30–60–90 Day Plan

Days 61–90: Embed Courageous Culture

- Celebrate micro-brave actions publicly
- Review systems that reward comfort over challenge
- Communicate school-wide learning from failures
- Establish long-term courage-building rituals

Days 61–90: Embedding and Sustaining

- **Focus:** Culture, credibility, and consolidation
- **Leadership stance:** *Courage becomes the norm*

1

Individual Leadership

Key Actions

- Review your Courage Gap self-assessment.
- Identify patterns of growth and remaining avoidance.
- Set one bold leadership commitment for the next term.
- Reflect on how discomfort has become more manageable.

Reflection Prompts

- How has my leadership changed since the start of the year?
- What courageous habits do I want to protect?

2

Team & Staff Culture

Key Actions

- Embed regular reflection and feedback into team routines.
- Develop emerging leaders through mentoring and stretch opportunities.
- Celebrate collective achievements and learning.
- Address any lingering cultural resistance directly.

Reflection Prompts

- What behaviours are now normalised?
- Where is further courage required to lift practice?

3

School Culture & Systems

Key Actions

- Evaluate the impact of initiatives against student outcomes.
- Refine or scale successful practices.
- Document learnings to inform future planning.
- Align systems to sustain progress rather than rely on individual effort.

Reflection Prompts

- Which changes are making the greatest difference?
- How well do systems support the culture we want?

4

Community & Relationships

Key Actions

- Share evidence of progress with the community.
- Acknowledge challenges honestly and constructively.
- Strengthen partnerships that support learning and wellbeing.
- Reaffirm the school's long-term direction.

Reflection Prompts

- How has the community responded to courageous leadership?
- Where do we need to continue advocating for students?

Closing Reflection

Bold leadership is not one brave moment — it is a pattern of courageous choices made over time.

Final Reflection Questions

- What courage gap have I closed this term?
- What gap remains?
- What is my next micro-brave step?

At the end of my 90 days, what are the attitudes and actions I might start, stop or continue?

Start	Stop	Continue

The Courage Gap by Margie Warrell Infographic

The Courage Gap = The space between intention and action caused by fear, self-doubt, risk-aversion, and "playing it safe" leadership habits.

Why it matters in Australian education:

- Evidence-informed change
- Equity-focused decisions
- Psychologically safe cultures
- Necessary conversations
- Innovation under pressure

What Courage Looks Like in Australian Educational Leadership

Middle Leaders	Deputies and Principals	System Leaders
Coach staff with honesty	Lead reform with clarity	Support diverse contexts
Support innovation	Address inequities	Champion First Nations perspectives
Challenge deficit thinking	Advocate for wellbeing	Enable innovation without fear

COURAGE CULTURE SNAPSHOT:
Courage grows through: psychological safety, transparency, vulnerability, celebrating effort, and encouraging innovation.

Examples of Micro-Brave Actions

Initiating a difficult conversation

Sharing vulnerable reflections

Saying "no" to low-impact work

Piloting new instructional practices

Naming inequities in staff meetings

Closing Your Courage Gap: Three Questions

1. Where is fear currently holding me back?
2. What is one micro-brave action I can take this week?
3. How will I model courage visibly for staff and students?

Your Micro-Bravery Plan

Appendix: AITSL Alignment – Principal Standard and Leadership Profiles

Leadership Requirements

Vision and Values

Purpose-driven, student-centred decision-making ("purpose bigger than fear") strengthens moral purpose and values-led leadership.

Knowledge and Understanding

Tools for leading change, navigating resistance, and using evidence support the knowledge base required to improve teaching and learning.

Personal Qualities, Social and Interpersonal Skills

Micro-bravery, vulnerability, and self-awareness build resilience, relational trust, and emotional intelligence.

Professional Practices

Leading Teaching and Learning
Supports feedback, evidence-informed improvement, and timely conversations about practice to lift student outcomes.

Developing Self and Others

Builds psychological safety, coaching habits, and courageous feedback practices that grow capability.

Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change

Normalises experimentation, reduces avoidance, and strengthens strategic risk-taking aligned to purpose.

Leading the Management of the School

Supports prioritisation, boundary-setting, and courageous decisions around resources, processes, and people.

Engaging and Working with the Community

Strengthens clear, values-based communication and advocacy for students while building trust.

Appendix: AITSL Alignment – Middle Leader Profiles

Vision and Values

Helps middle leaders articulate and lead a clear team vision grounded in student-centred purpose, even amid peer resistance.

Knowledge and Understanding

Develops understanding of change, resistance, feedback and learning culture required to influence practice.

Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills

Builds self-awareness, resilience, vulnerability, and relational courage essential for leading colleagues.

Leading Teaching and Learning

Strengthens capability to use data, give feedback, and address practice concerns promptly and respectfully.

Developing Self and Others

Supports creating psychologically safe teams where teachers take risks, learn from failure, and build collective efficacy.

Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change

Builds confidence-through-action and equips leaders to guide pilots, sustain momentum, and respond to resistance.

Leading Team Management

Supports prioritisation, boundary-setting, meeting effectiveness, accountability conversations, and managing competing expectations.

Engaging and Working with the School Community

Builds courageous communication and advocacy aligned to student needs and school priorities.

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