

Shaping the Future Together Toolkit

Strategy, Culture and Collective Action



How leaders shape the future rather than simply
respond to it.



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Shaping the Future Together

The future is not something that happens to us. It is something we create.

Across Australia, educational leaders are navigating unprecedented complexity. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how we think about learning. Communities are changing. Expectations of schools continue to evolve. New opportunities are emerging alongside new challenges. The future feels both exciting and uncertain.

In this environment, leadership is no longer simply about responding well to change. It is about helping to shape what comes next.

That question sits at the heart of this toolkit. It also sits at the heart of ACEL's work.

As an organisation, ACEL is undertaking its own renewal journey through ACEL 2030. We are reimagining our role, our structures, our membership experience and our contribution to the profession. We are asking many of the same questions educational leaders are asking in their schools, systems and communities:

- What should we preserve?
- What should we reimagine?
- Whose voices need to be heard?
- What future are we trying to create?

Importantly, we do not believe those questions can be answered by a small group of people on behalf of others. They require participation, dialogue and collective ownership.

At the same time, ACEL has been proud to partner with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on the Future Teacher Future Leader project. Through horizon scanning, futures thinking and scenario planning, that work invites us to consider a profound question:

Who gets to define the purpose of learning?

Beneath that question lies another:

Who gets to shape the future?

The answer matters.

Because the future of education will not be determined solely by technology, policy, markets or circumstance. It will be shaped by the choices leaders make today. By the conversations we convene. By the cultures we create. By the people we invite into the process. By our willingness to think beyond immediate challenges and imagine new possibilities.

This same spirit underpins the theme of ACEL's National Conference: ***Bold Leadership: New Frontiers in Education.***

Bold leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about having the courage to explore new questions.

- To engage diverse voices.
- To navigate uncertainty.
- To act with purpose. And...
- To create futures worth building.

This toolkit is both a practical resource and an invitation.

- An invitation to reflect on your own leadership.
- An invitation to engage with ideas, activities and conversations that support strategy, culture and collective action.
- An invitation to strengthen your agency as a leader and your capacity to influence what comes next.
- And an invitation to join a broader movement of educational leaders committed to shaping the future together.

Because the future cannot be designed alone.

It is created when people come together around a shared purpose and choose to build something better than what exists today.

Thank you for joining us on that journey.

Lisa Newland

Chief Executive Officer

Australian Council for Educational Leaders

**Be Seen.
Be Heard.
Connect.**

Together, we will shape the future of educational leadership in Australia.

How to Use This Toolkit

Shaping the Future Together is a leadership toolkit designed for educational leaders at all career stages — emerging, aspiring and established. It can be used independently, with a leadership team, as a professional learning resource, or as part of a conference or coaching experience.

This toolkit serves two purposes simultaneously: it provides genuine practical value to educational leaders navigating strategy, culture and change, and it models the collaborative, future-focused leadership approach that ACEL is itself using through the ACEL 2030 renewal journey.

As part of our ACEL 2030 work, we are exploring these ideas ourselves — how member voice can shape the future of educational leadership in Australia. This toolkit is both a resource and an invitation to join that conversation.

Recommended time investment

- 30–40 minutes to complete the opening reflection and work through one section
- 15–20 minutes per section if used with a leadership team
- Return to specific tools throughout the year as challenges arise

Suggested sequence

1. Start with the opening reflection — consider your own experience of change and ownership
2. Work through the three parts in order: Strategy → Culture → Collective Action
3. Select the specific tools most relevant to your current challenge
4. Use the You Said / We Learned / We Did / What's Next framework to close the loop

Best ways to use this toolkit

As an individual leader

- Personal strategic planning and reflection
- Preparing for a significant change initiative
- Coaching conversations with emerging leaders
- First 90 days in a new leadership role

As a leadership team

- Team planning days and retreats
- Designing a consultation or co-creation process
- Building a collective action plan
- Strengthening culture and belonging

A reminder:

The leaders who shape the future don't just respond to change. They ask: what opportunity does this challenge reveal? Then they ask what becomes possible if they think bigger.

Introduction: Why the Future Cannot Be Designed Alone

**A governance review invites comment.
A movement invites ownership.**

The most important leadership shift of our time is not about technology, curriculum reform, or organisational restructure. It is about who gets to shape the future.

For too long, change has been done to people rather than with them. Leaders announce strategy. Communities are informed. Stakeholders are consulted. And then leaders wonder why energy is low, resistance is high, and momentum is short-lived.

The reason is simple: people do not invest in futures they did not help build.

The AITSL Future Teacher Future Leader scenarios raise a question that cuts to the heart of this challenge. Across four very different education futures — from the Civic Learning Commons to the Platform-Defined Learning Market — one question sits beneath all of them:

Who has agency? Who gets to shape the future?

That question is also at the heart of ACEL 2030. ACEL is asking: what should our organisation become? And more importantly — who gets to answer that?

The answer we are working toward is: leaders do. Members do. The people doing the work every day across every school and system in Australia.

This toolkit is both a practical resource and a living demonstration of that belief. Every tool in it reflects something we are genuinely exploring ourselves as we shape ACEL's future together.

Opening Reflection

Think about a significant change initiative in your organisation.

Level	What it looked like
Were people told?	Decision was made. People were informed afterwards.
Were people informed?	People knew what was happening, but had no input.
Were people consulted?	Feedback was sought — but may not have shaped the outcome.
Were people involved?	People actively contributed to shaping the approach.
Did people co-create?	People helped design the solution from the beginning.
Did people own it?	People champion the change as if they built it — because they did.

Where did this initiative sit on the ownership continuum? What was the result?

ACT: Action Changes Things — What is one action I will take?

Self-Assessment Tool: Future-Shaping Leadership Reflection

Reflect on each statement and rate yourself (1 = Not yet true, 5 = Consistently true). This is not a performance measure — it is a starting point for honest reflection about where your greatest leadership growth lies.

1. I actively seek the perspectives of people who will be most affected by decisions I make.

Rating: ___ /5

2. I communicate the 'why' of change clearly — not just what is changing, but why it matters and why now.

Rating: ___ /5

3. I create genuine opportunities for stakeholders to shape decisions, not just respond to them.

Rating: ___ /5

4. I close the feedback loop — I tell people how their input has influenced what we do.

Rating: ___ /5

5. I am able to hold uncertainty and complexity without rushing to premature solutions.

Rating: ___ /5

6. I ask 'what opportunity does this challenge reveal?' before defaulting to problem-solving.

Rating: ___ /5

7. I take courageous action even when the path forward is not fully clear.

Rating: ___ /5

Where my greatest growth opportunity lies:

One micro-brave action I will take this week:

One courageous leadership decision I commit to this term:

PART 1

Strategy: Creating a Shared Future

Strategy determines direction. But the most elegant strategic plan will fail if the people it requires have no ownership of it.

This section moves beyond planning frameworks to explore the harder — and more important — question: how do you create a shared future that people believe in?

Leadership in Practice — ACEL 2030

As part of our renewal, ACEL is using exactly these tools to reimagine what our organisation should become. We are not asking members to approve a pre-written future — we are asking them to help design it.

Activity 1.1 – Future Backwards

This activity builds shared direction by starting at the destination, not the departure point. It works particularly well at the start of a planning cycle or when a team has lost its sense of purpose.

Imagine it is 2030.

Your school, organisation or team is genuinely thriving.

What are people saying about...

- The culture? How does it feel to work and learn here?
- Leadership? How do leaders lead? What makes them distinctive?
- Learning? What outcomes are students and staff achieving?
- Community? How has the relationship with your community changed?

Write three headlines from a 2030 newspaper that describe your future success:

Headline 1 —	
Headline 2 —	
Headline 3 —	

Activity 1.2 – What Must We Preserve? What Must We Reimagine?

One of the most important — and most avoided — conversations in any change process is the honest assessment of what is working and what is holding us back. This activity makes that conversation structured and safe.

PRESERVE What should never change?	REIMAGINE What can no longer stay the same?

Discussion prompts:

- Which traditions matter most to your community and why?
- What assumptions are we making that we have never explicitly tested?
- What future opportunities are emerging that current structures prevent us from taking?

Activity 1.3 – Future Priorities Canvas

Translate strategic thinking into focused action with this one-page planning canvas.

The future we want to create is...	
The greatest challenge we face is...	
The greatest opportunity we see is...	
The one strategic priority that matters most is...	
The first concrete action we can take is...	
We will know we are making progress when...	
The voices we most need to include are...	

After completing this canvas, what surprised you? What became clearer?

PART 2

Culture: Building the Conditions for Success

Strategy determines direction.

Culture determines whether people come with you.

The research is unambiguous: culture eats strategy for breakfast. A brilliant strategic plan implemented in a low-trust, low-belonging culture will underperform a modest plan in a high-trust, deeply connected community every time.

The question, then, is not whether culture matters. It is whether leaders are willing to do the harder, slower, more human work of building it intentionally.

This section draws on the themes of Belonging, Identity and Influence that underpin the ACEL 2030 renewal — and on the 6 Team Conditions research that shows high-performing teams are built not by selecting the right personalities, but by designing the right conditions.

What stories do people tell about your organisation? Complete these sentences:

"We always..."	
"Around here we..."	
"Leadership means..."	
"People like us..."	
"When things get hard we..."	
"The unwritten rule here is..."	

Now ask the harder questions:

- Which of these stories helps us move toward the future we want?
- Which stories are holding us back?
- What story do we want people to be telling in three years?

Activity 2.2 – Culture Audit

Use this audit to assess the health of the cultural conditions that make strategy possible. This works best when completed individually first, then compared and discussed as a team.

BELONGING

1. People in this organisation feel genuinely valued — not just useful.

Rating: __ /5
2. Diverse voices, perspectives and experiences are actively welcomed.

Rating: __ /5
3. New members and emerging leaders feel included and seen quickly.

Rating: __ /5

TRUST

4. People speak honestly, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular.

Rating: __ /5
5. Feedback — including difficult feedback — is welcomed and acted on.

Rating: __ /5
6. Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, not evidence of failure.

Rating: __ /5

COLLABORATION

7. We solve the most important problems collectively, not individually.

Rating: __ /5
8. Expertise is shared freely across the organisation.

Rating: __ /5
9. Success is celebrated as a collective achievement.

Rating: __ /5

One STRENGTH to build on	One TENSION to address	One ACTION to take

Activity 2.3 – Strategic Culture Commitment

Culture change is not an initiative. It is a series of deliberate, consistent choices made over time. This tool helps translate audit insights into specific commitments.

To create the future we want, we need MORE of...	
To create the future we want, we need LESS of...	
The specific behaviour I will model consistently is...	
I will know our culture is shifting when I see/hear...	
The person who will hold me accountable is...	

PART 3

Collective Action: Moving from Ideas to Ownership

Most leadership resources stop at vision. They help leaders think about the future, but leave the harder question unanswered: how do you actually move people from understanding to action — from agreement to ownership?

This section is where the toolkit becomes distinctive. Collective action is not the same as collective agreement. It requires leaders to do something genuinely difficult: share power, create pathways for contribution, and make visible the connection between voice and outcome.

Leadership in Practice — ACEL 2030

The Inspire → Engage → Co-Create campaign ACEL is using for its constitutional renewal is a real-world example of each tool in this section. We are not just describing these approaches — we are attempting them.

Activity 3.1 – The Ownership Ladder

Before designing any consultation or engagement process, it helps to be honest about where people currently sit and where they need to be. This ladder makes that conversation visible.



Reflection:

- Where are most of your people today on this ladder?
- Where do they need to be for the change to succeed?
- What would move them one level higher?

Activity 3.2 – Stakeholder Mapping: Whose Voices Are Missing?

The most important consultation question is not ‘who have we told?’ It is ‘whose voice is missing?’ This activity surfaces the silent, the sceptical, and the underrepresented — and builds a plan to hear from them.

SUPPORTERS <i>Those already engaged and aligned.</i>	SCEPTICS <i>Those with concerns. Their questions strengthen the outcome.</i>	INFLUENCERS <i>Those whose endorsement shifts others.</i>	SILENT VOICES <i>Those most affected but least heard.</i>

Key questions:

- Which voices are least represented in our current process?
- What barriers prevent them from contributing? How might we remove those barriers?
- Who are the informal leaders — the people others listen to — and how do we engage them?

Activity 3.3 – Collective Action Plan

A conversation without a commitment is just a conversation. This tool translates the insights from consultation into specific, named actions that create momentum.

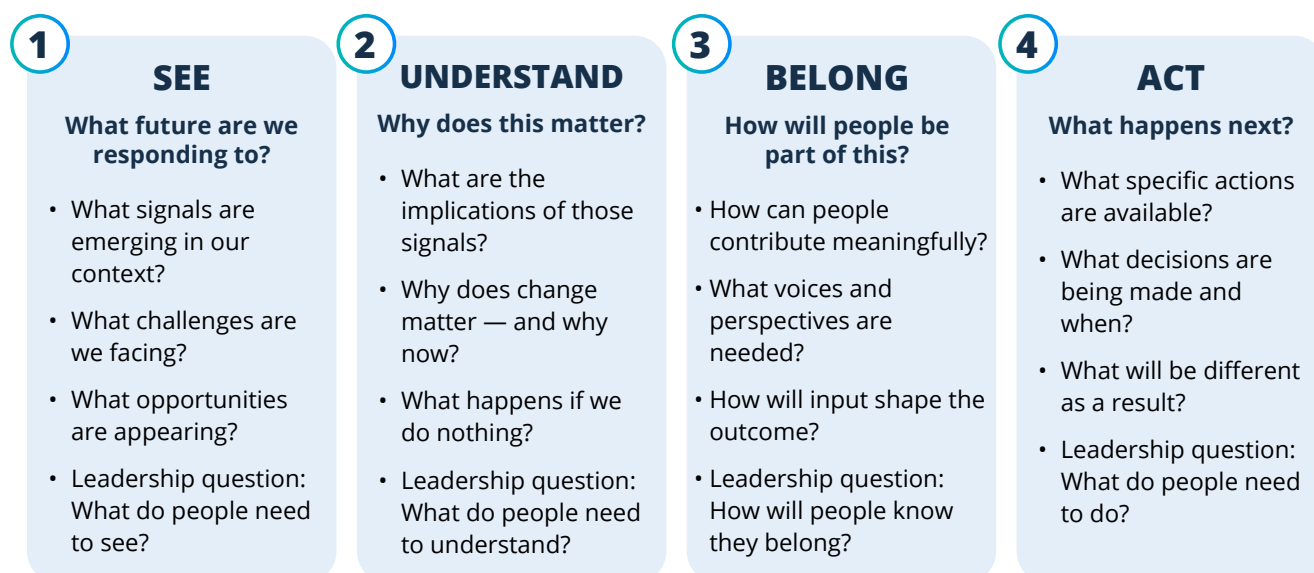
One conversation that needs to happen is...	
The person I need to have it with is...	
One partnership that needs to be strengthened is...	
One opportunity for broader participation is...	
One structural or process barrier I need to address is...	
One action I can begin in the next 48 hours is...	
I will report back on progress by...	

What is the one action that, if taken, would create the most momentum right now?

Resource 1: The SEE → UNDERSTAND → BELONG → ACT Framework

One of the most common leadership communication failures is answering the wrong question. Leaders often communicate as if people are asking: What is changing? When people are actually asking: Why? Why now? Why this? What does this mean for me?

This framework provides a structure for communication that meets people where they actually are — and moves them toward the understanding, belonging and action that make change possible.



Communication Planning Template

Use this template before any significant communication about change or future direction.

The future we are responding to is...	
The key message people need to understand is...	
What we know — and what we don't yet know is...	
How people can contribute to shaping this is...	
What changes because of this — and what stays the same...	
The specific next action we are asking people to take is...	
When and how we will report back is...	

Resource 2: Shaping Complex Futures

Shaping the future requires more than vision.

The leaders who successfully create change have not just a compelling picture of the future — they have also ensured the conditions for people to move toward it.

One of the most practical frameworks in leadership research identifies five elements that, when present together, produce collective progress — and shows clearly what happens when any one is missing.

Element	Status	Result
Shared Future	Missing	Confusion
Capability	Missing	Anxiety
Ownership	Missing	Resistance
Capacity	Missing	Frustration
Action	Missing	False Starts
All Present		Collective Progress

Diagnostic Reflection

Think about a current initiative that is not moving as well as you hoped. Which element is most likely missing?

- ☐ **Lack of shared future** — people are not clear on where we are heading or why it matters
- ☐ **Lack of capability** — people do not yet have the skills or knowledge to do what is required
- ☐ **Lack of ownership** — people have not been genuinely involved in shaping the direction
- ☐ **Lack of capacity** — people have insufficient time, resources or support to act
- ☐ **Lack of action** — there is no clear first step, or the first step is too large to take

The most important thing I can do to address this gap is:
My diagnosis and my response:

Resource 3: The Future-Shaping Conversation Planner

Great leadership conversations don't happen by accident. They are prepared. This one-page planner helps leaders think through the conversations that matter most — before having them.

The future we are discussing is...	
What people in this conversation care most about is...	
The concerns most likely to emerge are...	
The questions I most expect to be asked are...	
What we know for certain is...	
What we are still working through is...	
How people can contribute to shaping this is...	
What happens as a result of this conversation is...	
How I will follow up and report back is...	

A note on uncertainty:

Leaders often feel they must have all the answers before communicating. The opposite is true. Acknowledging what you don't yet know — while being clear about what you do know and how people can influence the outcome — builds more trust than false certainty ever will.

Resource 4: You Said / We Learned / We Did / What's Next

The real trust-building happens after the consultation.

Most leaders are reasonably good at asking for feedback. Far fewer are good at demonstrating that they listened, made sense of what they heard, acted on it, and created pathways for continued ownership.

This framework extends the familiar 'You Said / We Did' model into four stages — because the middle two stages (We Learned and We Did) are where trust is actually built or lost.

Stage 1: YOU SAID — Leadership Behaviour: Deep Listening

Purpose: Capture voices without immediately defending, explaining or solving. The goal at this stage is not to respond — it is to understand.

Leadership reflection checklist:

- ☐ Have we captured what people said — not our interpretation of it?
- ☐ Have we noted why it matters and the feeling behind the feedback?
- ☐ Have we genuinely heard minority viewpoints — not just majority ones?
- ☐ Have we identified which voices are still missing?

ACEL Example — You Said:

- Members want stronger opportunities for genuine connection, not just events.
- Emerging leaders feel underrepresented in current structures and conversations.
- Regional and rural leaders want greater visibility — they feel invisible.
- Members want ACEL to have a louder, more consistent national advocacy voice.

Stage 2: WE LEARNED — Leadership Behaviour: Collective Sense-Making

Purpose: This is the stage most organisations skip — moving directly from 'You Said' to 'We Did' without showing how leaders made sense of the feedback. This stage is where understanding is built.

Leadership reflection checklist:

- ☐ Have we explained what patterns emerged across different stakeholder groups?
- ☐ Have we named which assumptions were challenged by what we heard?
- ☐ Have we been honest about where opinions differed — not just where there was consensus?
- ☐ Have we acknowledged what became more complex, not just clearer?

ACEL Example — We Learned:

- Connection matters as much as — perhaps more than — professional learning content.
- Leadership pathways need to be visible, accessible, and designed for the career stage people are actually at.
- Belonging drives engagement. Leaders will invest where they feel genuinely valued.
- Members want influence — not just information. There is a deep desire to shape, not just receive.
- Future structures must work equally well for metropolitan and regional communities. Urban-default design is a trust barrier.

Stage 3: WE DID — Leadership Behaviour: Responsive Action

Purpose: This is where trust becomes visible. People do not expect leaders to implement every idea. They do expect leaders to explain clearly what happened to their input.

Four categories of response:

ADOPTED <i>Changed directly because of feedback.</i>	ADAPTED <i>Changed partially — feedback shaped the approach.</i>	DEFERRED <i>Remains under consideration — not yet actioned.</i>	DECLINED <i>Will not proceed — and here is why.</i>

Leadership reflection checklist:

- ☐ Have we explained the reasoning behind each decision — not just announced it?
- ☐ Have we acknowledged contributions by name or group where appropriate?
- ☐ Have we been transparent about limitations — budget, governance, timeline?
- ☐ Have we shown evidence of action, not just described intent?

Stage 4: WHAT'S NEXT — Leadership Behaviour: Creating Ownership

Purpose: Many organisations stop after reporting outcomes. Future-focused leaders use this final stage to invite people into the next chapter — transforming consultation into collective action.

What happens immediately as a result of this process is...	
Who can contribute to the next phase, and how, is...	
The decisions that remain open for contribution are...	
How progress will be shared, and when, is...	
How people can stay involved in shaping what comes next is...	

Resource 5: BIG IT UP – From Problem-Solving to Opportunity-Seeking

Most leaders ask: How do we solve this?

Future-shaping leaders also ask: What does this make possible?

BIG IT UP is a leadership habit — a deliberate shift in the quality of question you ask when confronted with a challenge. It does not replace rigorous analysis. It adds a dimension of possibility thinking that is often missing from change processes in education.

The ACEL 2030 renewal is itself an example of BIG IT UP thinking. The immediate challenge was a declining membership and an outdated constitution. The bigger question was: what should ACEL become? And what would that make possible for every educational leader in Australia?

The BIG IT UP Reflection Tool

Apply this five-step process to any challenge you are currently facing.

Step 1	What is the immediate problem or challenge?
Step 2	What is the opportunity hidden inside this challenge?
Step 3	What is the larger opportunity — if we think bigger?
Step 4	If we were truly bold, what might we create?
Step 5	If this became a defining success story, what would people say we did?

BIG IT UP in Practice — ACEL Example:

The Obvious Response	The BIG IT UP Response
Challenge: Membership decline. Response: Increase marketing, recruit more members and review pricing.	Same challenge. Bigger question. What if this wasn't a membership problem at all? What if it was an opportunity to reimagine how educational leaders connect, contribute and belong—and build a national movement shaping the future of education?

Resource 6: Future-Shaping Leadership Scorecard

Use this scorecard at the end of a consultation process, change initiative, or planning cycle. It captures both the quality of leadership practice and the conditions that have been created for collective progress.

Leadership Behaviour

LISTENING — Did we genuinely seek diverse perspectives, including those least heard? Rating: ____/5

SENSE-MAKING — Did we help people understand what we learned from their input? Rating: ____/5

TRANSPARENCY — Did we explain our decisions clearly, including where we said no? Rating: ____/5

ACTION — Did feedback result in visible change that people can point to? Rating: ____/5

OWNERSHIP — Do people feel they helped shape this — not just respond to it? Rating: ____/5

COMMUNICATION — Did we communicate in a way that built understanding, belonging and momentum? Rating: ____/5

BOLDNESS — Did we ask the bigger question, not just solve the immediate problem? Rating: ____/5

The Bold Leadership Reflection — Closing the Toolkit

Future — What future are we trying to shape?	
People — Who needs to help shape it?	
Culture — What culture will make it possible?	
Action — What is the next courageous step?	

Bold leadership is not a single brave moment.

It is a pattern of courageous choices, made consistently,
in the direction of a future worth building.

Be Seen. Be Heard. Connect.

Appendix: Alignment to AITSL Standards

Principal Standard – Leadership Requirements

Vision and Values

The Future Backwards activity, BIG IT UP framework and Shared Future Canvas all strengthen purpose-driven, values-led leadership — helping leaders articulate and act from a clear moral purpose rather than reactive management.

Knowledge and Understanding

The Complex Change model and Collective Action tools build practical knowledge for leading adaptive change, navigating uncertainty, and using stakeholder insight to inform evidence-based strategy.

Personal Qualities, Social and Interpersonal Skills

The Self-Assessment, Culture Audit and Ownership Ladder develop self-awareness, relational courage, and the vulnerability required to lead authentically during uncertainty.

Principal Standard – Professional Practices

Leading Teaching and Learning

The SEE → UNDERSTAND → BELONG → ACT framework and Future-Shaping Conversation Planner support leaders in communicating change in ways that build understanding and readiness for new practice — a prerequisite for pedagogical improvement.

Developing Self and Others

The You Said / We Learned / We Did / What's Next framework models the listening, sense-making and transparency that builds the psychological safety necessary for others to learn, take risks and grow.

Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change

BIG IT UP reframes change from problem-management to possibility-seeking — equipping leaders to sustain the energy and ambition required for genuine improvement over time.

Engaging and Working with the Community

The Stakeholder Mapping and Collective Action tools build leaders' capacity to create genuine participation structures — moving from tokenistic consultation to authentic co-creation with community members.

Middle Leader Profiles

All tools in this toolkit are equally applicable to middle leaders navigating change within their teams and faculties. The Ownership Ladder, Culture Audit and Conversation Planner are particularly relevant to middle leaders who must build ownership without full positional authority.

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