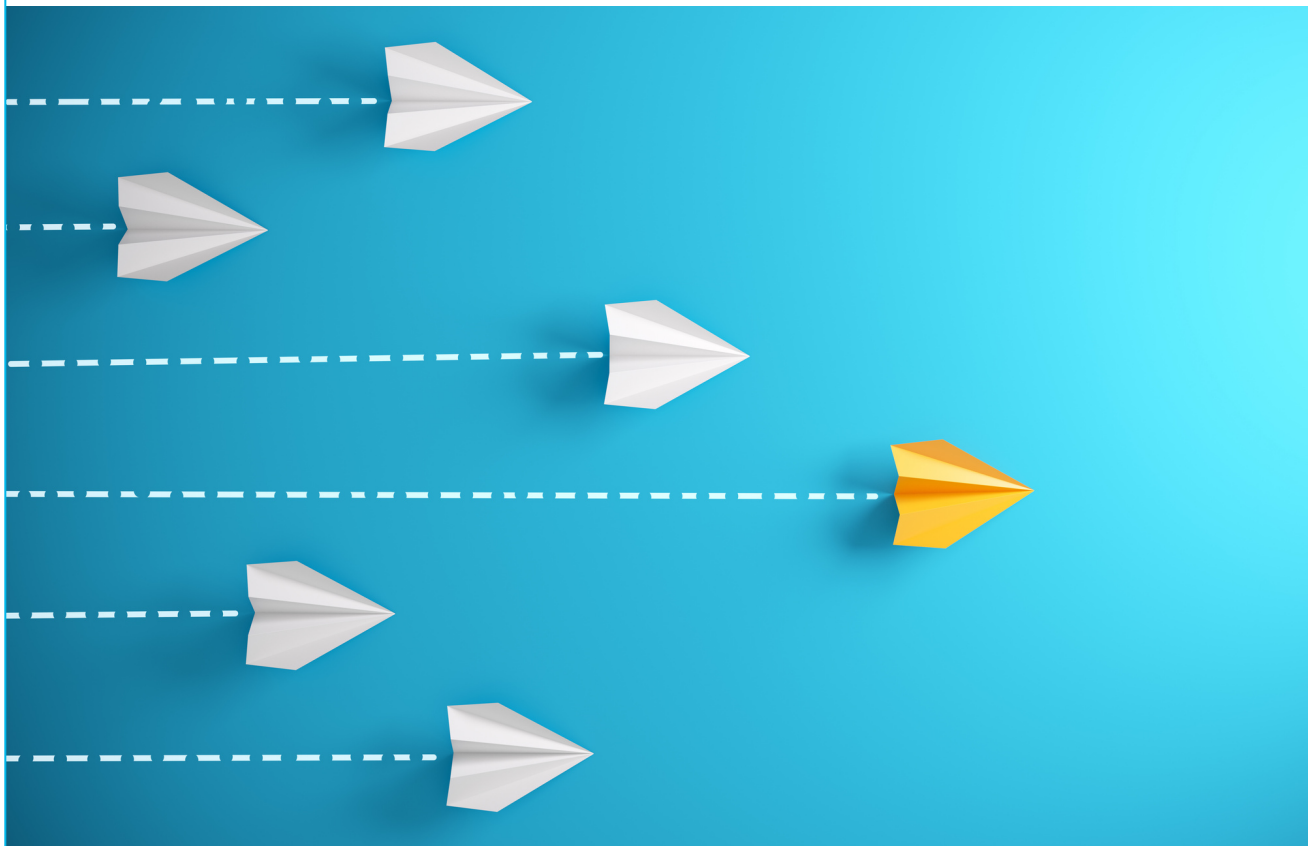


Leading with Clarity, Conscience, and Community: Rethinking School Leadership





Contents

Introduction: What We're Not Saying Enough	01
From Hero to Host: A Shift in Leadership Identity	02
The Self-Care Lie (And the Truth About Rhythms)	03
Feedback Isn't a Luxury —It's a Leadership Responsibility	04
Strategy Without Connection Is Just Paper	05
Results vs. Relationships? False Choice.	06
This Is Our Moment	07
Next Steps: Join the Movement	08
About the Authors	09
About 21CL & HIVE	10
About Lead To Succeed Summit	11



Introduction:

What We're Not Saying Enough

International school leaders in 2025 are not just running schools. They're orchestrating complex ecosystems. They're balancing cultural nuance, educational excellence, and financial viability—often without the full support structure that's standard in other sectors.

In most cases, Heads of School are expected to:

- Set strategic direction
- Manage multi-million-dollar budgets
- Navigate real estate development and campus planning
- Oversee marketing and admissions
- Lead HR and recruitment (often globally)
- Respond to board expectations, parent advocacy, and political pressure
- Maintain operational readiness across finance, legal, IT, and facilities
- Ensure the academic program meets and exceeds educational accreditation requirements"
- And somehow—still lead teaching and learning at the core

All of this while fostering a healthy school culture and ensuring student success.

"An international school Head should come from a teaching excellence background—but they are rarely prepared for the business and management needs of the role." —Dr. Howard Stribbell

In many cases, these responsibilities exist without a dedicated Chief Operating Officer (COO) or experienced business manager. Even when such roles exist, they often report to the Head, placing the ultimate accountability back where it started: squarely on the leader's shoulders.

"Leadership is not about being the hero. It's about creating the conditions for everyone else to thrive." —Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper



And yet—most leadership preparation programs still prioritize instructional frameworks over strategic planning, financial forecasting, or board governance.

This disconnect is costing leaders—and schools—dearly.

53% of principals in Australia plan to quit, citing burnout, overload, and aggression from stakeholders [*The Guardian*]

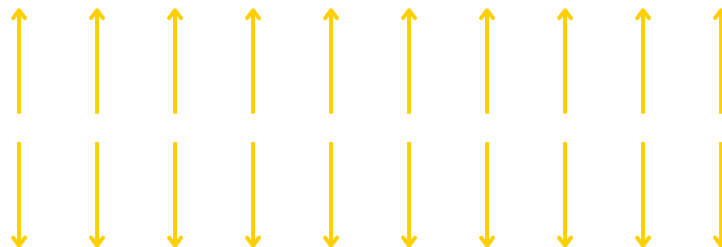
41% of UK senior leaders report higher burnout levels than classroom teachers [*Education Support*]

82% of school leaders have experienced physical violence at work—a stark indicator of emotional pressure and external volatility

“I’ve been the leader who said yes when I should have said no. And I know how it feels to carry that invisible weight.” —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

Let’s be clear:

The gap between what’s expected and



what’s supported has never been wider.

This white paper is both a warning and an invitation—a call to shift how we support international school leaders, how we structure their work, and how we prepare the next generation to lead not just well, but sustainably.



From Hero to Host: A Shift in Leadership Identity

In the traditional model, school leaders were expected to be the expert in the room; the problem-solver; the final word; the hero.

But that version of leadership is no longer fit for purpose.

“As a new leader, I had no roadmap. The mentorship program saved me.” —Thomas Midbo

“We are expected to build culture from scratch, or shift the existing culture, and create safe spaces for others to thrive, but no one really teaches us how. A strong mentorship program, that models a team approach, is critical for new leaders.” —Tanja Caley

Today, successful school leaders aren’t heroes. They’re hosts. They build the space where others thrive. They coach, convene, connect, and clarify. They share leadership, distribute decision-making, and cultivate culture through trust, not control.

This shift from expert to enabler isn’t just anecdotal—it’s backed by global data:

- A large-scale study in Shanghai found that distributed leadership significantly improves teacher job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.51$), career well-being ($\beta = 0.45$), and professional self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.33$) [source: *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2023]
- And yet, most international schools still default to top-down leadership models, leaving middle leaders unsupported and teachers disengaged.

“Eventually I realized leadership wasn’t about doing it all. It was about building the structures so others could lead well.” —Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper

The cost of clinging to the “hero” model is high:

- Leadership bottlenecks slow progress
- Decision-making lacks transparency
- Staff feel disempowered or micromanaged
- Succession pipelines dry up



Worse, it creates isolated Heads who shoulder the entire system, burning out quietly while trying to be everything to everyone.

“Leaders must stop seeing themselves as the final line of defense. We’re here to multiply leadership, not hoard it.” —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

Call to Action



- Audit your leadership meetings. How often are decisions co-created versus top-down?
- Facilitate a “Vision Reboot” workshop. Engage staff across all levels to revisit values, direction, and shared ownership.
- Develop middle leaders. Provide time, training, and trust—not just a title.

The Self-Care Lie (And the Truth About Rhythms)

Let's stop pretending that "work-life balance" is a realistic goal for international school leaders.

In this role, you're not clocking in and out. You're absorbing the energy of an entire school community. You're holding space for stressed teachers, anxious parents, and vulnerable students. You're navigating peak stress events—from visa crises to emergency evacuations—and doing it all while trying to look composed and focused.

"I've been the leader who does it all with a smile and a 'no worries'—even when saying yes was a personal sacrifice." —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

International school leadership demands more than time management. It requires rhythm management—an intentional calibration of push and pause. Leaders who don't recognize and honor the natural ebb and flow of the academic year burn out, quietly and predictably.

"I plan my work-life balance the same way I plan the academic calendar. I schedule it." —Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper

"I look at the rhythm of the week and build in 'focus time' the same way I'd block out a meeting." —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

"Self-care isn't selfish. If I don't take care of myself, I can't show up well for my team." —Thomas Midbo

The data backs up the urgency:

- 41% of school leaders in the UK report exhaustion, outpacing even frontline teachers [source: *Education Support*]
- Emotional burnout is now a leading cause of principal attrition globally [source: *Hanover Research*]



But here's the truth few leaders are willing to say out loud:

Schools that celebrate overwork normalize it. And once it's normalized, everyone—leaders included—pays the price.

Leaders need to set boundaries, not just for themselves, but as a signal to the rest of the staff that it's safe to protect their energy too.

"Leadership isn't about being available all the time. It's more about modelling and normalizing the ability to disconnect, as needed."

—Tanja Caley

"There's no such thing as school and life balance. There are just choices. More importantly, there are no standards. What works for you may not work for someone else. Yes, the work has to get done, but leadership is a marathon, not a sprint." —Dr. Howard Stribbell

Call to Action



- Map the pressure points in your school year—report cards, inspections, admissions season—and pre-block your recovery time.
- Share your non-negotiables publicly (e.g., no meetings after 4pm, lunch alone on Thursdays, 20-minute walks midday).
- Model balance. If you normalize rest, others will follow.



Feedback Isn't a Luxury

—It's a Leadership Responsibility

One of the quiet failures in school leadership today is the hesitation around giving meaningful feedback—especially when it's hard.

Many school leaders are deeply relational, and that's a strength. But too often, the desire to be kind gets confused with the avoidance of conflict. Feedback becomes irregular, vague, or entirely absent—until it's too late.

“Feedback is easy when things are going well. It's harder—but more important—when it's not. It needs to be consistent, timely and hold value in order to be effective and create change.” —Tanja Caley

“The key is to keep it about the practice, not the person.”
—Thomas Midbo

A 2023 Hive Schools internal study found that 62% of school leaders delayed giving difficult feedback due to fear of backlash, uncertainty about language, or lack of support from above. The result? Patterns persist. Underperformance compounds. And the strongest teachers start wondering if excellence even matters.

“Feedback doesn't have to be loud to be powerful. But it does have to be consistent.” —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

“Most leaders wait too long to give effective feedback. When done right, it can be very powerful. And the conversation is easier the earlier it is.”
—Dr. Howard Stribbell

Feedback isn't a task to tick off after everything else is done. It's not a seasonal performance ritual. It's the job.

Done well, it improves instructional quality, boosts morale, and affirms professional growth.

Done poorly—or avoided—it erodes credibility and weakens the school culture.

"Teachers strive to do well, they appreciate feedback - it informs their practice and it lets them know that you are interested in their work".

—Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper

"Creating a teacher observation guide about quality teaching with teachers creates a common language for teachers to self-reflect and receive feedback." —Dr. Kathy Salmon



Call to Action

- Normalize real-time micro-feedback. Catch great practice in the moment and say so—don't save it for formal reviews.
- Use a simple RDA model in feedback conversations:
 - **Reflect:** "Can I share something I noticed this week?"
 - **Describe:** "Here's what I observed in your class..."
 - **Align:** "This connects to our school focus on active engagement."
- Document every key conversation. Follow up with a short, respectful email summary—this isn't about control, it's about clarity.
- Don't delay feedback. If you feel it, say it—before you overthink it or it becomes resentment.

Strategy Without Connection Is Just Paper

Strategic plans in schools are often beautifully formatted, filled with lofty language—and utterly disconnected from daily decisions

It's not that leaders don't care about strategy. It's that strategy becomes siloed—owned by a small team, revisited once a year, then forgotten in the busyness of school life.

“If your leadership team isn't echoing the same priorities in every conversation, you're not aligned. Difficulties arise when your community sees and hears the disconnection.”—Tanja Caley

“We stopped treating vision as a document. We started talking about it in every meeting.”—Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper

Real strategic alignment shows up in hallway conversations, lesson planning meetings, parent coffees, and morning assemblies. When everyone knows the direction—and sees how their work connects to it—ownership grows.

Yet, in most schools:

- Vision lives in binders, not in behavior.
- Leaders set goals without operationalizing them.
- Teams execute in silos instead of systems.

“Strategy has to be embedded in systems, routines, and people—not merely pinned on a wall.”—Dr. Lisa Ziebart

And the result? Priorities become performative. Teachers disengage. Leaders chase compliance rather than build commitment.

“The architecture of a school is critical - having strong policies and procedures, effective programming, meeting and communication structures and distributed leadership - it's what allows strategy to live and breathe - without it, it's frenetic.”—Dr. Kathy Salmon



Call to Action

- Start every leadership meeting with a 2-minute alignment. Ask: “What are we actually trying to do this month, and is our time aligned with that?”
- End staff meetings with reflection. Connect what was discussed to the school’s stated values and goals.
- Audit your leadership calendar. Do the recurring structures (staff meetings, PD, data reviews) reinforce your strategic priorities—or distract from them?



Results vs. Relationships? False Choice.

One of the most damaging myths in school leadership is the idea that leaders have to choose between being liked and being effective.

That it's either the relational "nice guy" or the driven "results person."

But the best leaders know: it's both—or it's neither.

"You'll never get the results you want without investing in relationships." —Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper

"People will accept tough decisions if they know they were heard."
—Thomas Midbo

"Without relationships, you can't get results. They are both important. In order to get good results you need to have relationships to implement the programming and quality teaching to create an environment where students and staff thrive." —Dr. Kathy Salmon

The data supports this:

- Schools with high levels of relational trust outperform others on academic outcomes, even in similar contexts [source: *Bryk & Schneider, 2002*].
- Distributed leadership models—where trust and communication are prioritized—consistently correlate with higher student achievement and teacher retention [source: *OECD, 2023*].

And yet, fewer than **30%** of international school leaders receive formal training in relationship-based leadership—including communication across cultures, navigating interpersonal tension, or coaching through resistance [source: *Hanover Research, 2023*].



“An open-door policy is not enough. You need to build structured systems for feedback, mentorship, and visibility.” —Dr. Lisa Ziebart

Strong relationships aren’t accidental. They are:

- Built through daily, intentional conversations
- Strengthened by transparency and consistency
- Measured by morale, retention, and team resilience—not just smiles in staff photos

Call to Action



- Track your relational work. Set personal metrics: number of informal check-ins, hallway conversations, or positive parent calls per week.
- Mentor at least one emerging leader. Let them shadow both your hard decisions and your relational wins.
- Make emotional intelligence part of your PD plan. Your top teacher might be your next leader—but only if they know how to lead people, not just programs.

This Is Our Moment

The international education sector is at an inflection point.

There are now 14,833 international schools globally, generating over \$67 billion USD in fee income annually—a number projected to grow steadily through 2030 [source: ISC Research, 2025].

But with growth comes complexity.

School leaders are no longer just instructional coaches or community builders. They're strategists, operators, and culture carriers, all rolled into one.

"An international school Head should come from a teaching excellence background—but they are rarely prepared for the business and management needs of the role." —Dr. Howard Stribbell

Yet too many Heads and Principals are left to learn the operational side on the job—budgeting, PropCo/OpCo dynamics, HR frameworks, admissions strategies—often without a business manager or COO to support them.

The leadership demands are mounting—faster than most schools can develop the talent to meet them.

At the same time, the opportunity has never been greater:

- To design systems that put wellness and performance on equal footing
- To build teams that are diverse, distributed, and deeply aligned
- To redefine success as sustainable leadership, not sacrificial burnout



"This is the moment to stop chasing perfection and start building teams that lead with clarity, conscience, and community." —Dr. Howard Stribbell

Next Steps: Join the Movement

Leadership in schools isn't just evolving—it's being redefined.

If you're feeling the tension between what you're asked to do and what you're equipped to handle, you're not alone. And you're not stuck.

Here's how you can take the next step:

1

Join the Hive Leadership Network

A space for international school leaders to share, collaborate, and grow. You'll get:

- Access to upcoming leadership cohorts
- Opportunities to contribute to future white papers and panels
- Monthly leadership focus prompts and tools

2

Host a Leadership Reboot Session

Book a half-day or full-day session with Hive Schools to realign your leadership team around values, rhythms, and relationships. We'll help you turn insight into implementation.

3

Build the Next White Paper with Us

This paper started with a handful of candid interviews. Our next one could include your voice. Want in?

Let's lead together—with clarity, community, and conscience.

4

Be Part of Lead to Succeed Summit

Join us at Lead to Succeed Summit - a conference designed for international school leaders who want to sharpen their practice, connect with peers, and gain the clarity needed to navigate today's challenges with confidence. Upcoming edition happening on 8-9 May 2026 in Bangkok. (leadtosucceed.community)

**Dr. Howard Stribbell**

Founder and CEO of Hive Schools International. With 28+ years in global education and a PhD in Educational Technology and Management, Howard has led schools across Asia and Canada. He champions sustainable leadership, authentic school culture, and strategic school growth. Howard also mentors Heads of School and is a sought-after speaker on international leadership and educational entrepreneurship.

**Dr. Rose Anne Kuiper**

An international school leader, former Superintendent of Schools, with decades of experience in Ontario Curriculum and school leadership. Rose Anne is known for her empathetic leadership style and emphasis on relational trust, recovery rhythms, and staff wellness.

**Thomas Midbo**

A respected school principal with a practical lens on leadership transitions, team development, and systems building. Thomas brings a grounded approach to feedback, reflection, and mission alignment.

**Tanja Caley**

An experienced Head of School who has led successful teams through both founding school startups and complex reorganizations. Tanja specializes in vision alignment, strategic planning, and leadership coaching using a 'relationship first' approach to building strong collaborative teams.

**Dr. Lisa Ziebart**

An experienced educator and school leader, Lisa brings deep expertise in teacher wellness, curriculum design, and instructional leadership. Her work focuses on helping leaders create the conditions for sustainable excellence - for themselves and the teachers and students they serve. She is committed to reimagining leadership as work that is purposeful, collaborative, and deeply human.

**Dr. Kathy Salmon**

Educational consultant and former school principal, Kathy is passionate about building school architecture that lasts—structures, protocols, and distributed leadership that allow staff to thrive and students to succeed. Kathy has expertise in English as an Additional Language, literacy, learner profile data, and strategic planning.



About 21CL & HIVE



21st Century Learning (21CL) was founded as a way of promoting the sharing of best practice around what learning in schools should look like in the 21st century.

Staying true to our mission of Building Communities of Learners, we organise a variety of premier conferences and events, offering a diverse range of online educational opportunities, and delivering first class consultancy services for schools and school groups.

Over 20,000 educators and counting have discovered new ideas, developed new skills and connected with global peers at our events.

More details: 21c-learning.com



Hive Schools International, founded by Dr. Howard Stribbell, is a collaborative network of Canadian-curriculum international schools committed to academic integrity, authentic leadership, and evidence-informed management. With decades of experience in school leadership, Hive empowers school owners, boards, and Heads of School through strategic planning, distributed leadership, and research-backed professional development.

Grounded in both relational trust and operational excellence, Hive partners with schools to ensure that every decision—from governance to pedagogy—is guided by data, grounded in best practice, and designed for long-term impact.

More details: hiveschools.org



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8-9 May 2026 | Bangkok



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Lead To Succeed Summit (L2SS) is a conference designed to help current and aspiring leaders in international schools develop the skills they need to succeed in their roles.

CONFERENCE TOPIC AREAS

SYSTEMS IN SCHOOLS

- Culture
- Growth and Evaluation
- Coaching
- Whole School Wellness
- Data Based Decision Making
- DEI
- Innovative Pedagogy
- Strategic Planning

OPERATIONAL

- Authentic School Marketing
- Finance and Budgeting
- Learning Spaces
- DEI

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

- Change Management
- Facilitate Leadership
- DEI Mentoring and Growing
- High Performing Teams
- Instructional Leadership for
- Impactful Student Learning
- Work Smarter Not Hard

CULTURE

- Trust in Schools
- Resilient School Communities
- Managing Burn Out – How to Keep Strong Leaders
- Coaching Culture

