

Leadership for an Identity Safe School

Introduction

Leadership styles are as varied and unique as the number of people willing to lead. Given dedication and conviction, the personal style of leadership for any leader can carry identity safety forward across the school community. Strong leaders empower staff to support students in thinking creatively and independently, using their knowledge, skills, and determination for reaching their highest potentials (Blankstein, 2004; Nieto, 1998; Noguera, 2003). The link between education and equity is upheld by every child's right to learn and the need for an educated citizenry in a democratic nation (Banks, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Identity safe leaders wear many hats, orchestrating within each role to create a positive climate and establish pathways for student voice and agency. They create conditions for the inclusion of all voices and foster a climate that is anti-racist and anti-oppressive. Creating equitable assessment systems, they guide and mentor staff. They facilitate continual professional learning and engage students, staff, and families in decision-making. Their words and deeds are in sync, and their vision leads to identity safe students of all backgrounds who achieve at high levels. This includes students with special needs, English learners, and those who require alternative modes of instruction. Each child is provided the resources needed to scaffold their learning.

As our world rushes toward change at an exponential rate, and as the United States advances toward the year when White people no longer constitute the majority of the population, more educators have an agency to cultivate diversity

within the school system. Identity safe leaders will discover themselves ahead of the curve as they build their schools into learning organizations fostering equal status and opportunity for all students. These leaders build awareness and prepare their staff with an equity lens, promote culturally relevant teaching methods, and confront racism and all forms of bias directly and with confidence.

Leadership for an identity safe school is grounded in the seven principles of identity safety, outlined in Chapter 1. We restate them in this case, as they pertain to leadership:

1. **Colorblind teaching** that ignores differences is a barrier to inclusion in the classroom.

Leaders learn how to avoid the colorblind trap for themselves and staff, modeling openness about their own backgrounds. They encourage all members of the school community to participate with their full social identities salient. When leaders articulate this principle and share its purpose, staff will be more likely to embrace and enact it with students.

2. **To feel a sense of belonging and acceptance** requires creating positive relationships between teacher and students and among students with equal status for different social identities.

Leaders have a unique opportunity and responsibility to foster belonging and acceptance for everyone. They are often the ones who are first to become aware of newly enrolled students, families in crisis, and other factors that can create potentially isolating conditions for children. They also know which students are repeatedly subject to exclusion or bullying and need support. Leaders work with staff to restructure school policies and traditions in order to nurture positive relationships and equalize status.

3. **Cultivating diversity** as a resource for learning and expressing high expectations for students promotes learning, competence, and achievement.

In identity safety, diversity is a resource for learning in all curricular areas. Educational leaders ensure its application through professional learning about culturally relevant pedagogy. Leaders also make resources available from primary source curriculum banks to classroom libraries with expository and fictional sources for every grade level and subject. They lead staff and parent/caregiver dialogue about race and

help teachers learn to facilitate these conversations with their students. Leaders draw from the cultural capital of all their students and families to enrich the school culture. Leaders hold high expectations for students and staff, giving positive feedback that communicates belief in their potential. These skills can be taught to educators so that they will be able to translate them into their practice with their students.

A powerful way to cultivate diversity for learning is to diversify staff to mirror the student body. Students benefit in many ways from being around adults who look like them and are likely to share many of their values and cultural practices. The presence of staff of color not only provides meaningful support to students but also can serve to change the conversations in staff meetings with discussions that guide decision-making to include the interests and needs of all students.

- 4. Educators examine their own social identities** to feel a sense of identity safety and convey that feeling to students, creating an identity safe environment for them.

This process of unpacking social identities centers on race, culture, gender, and economic status, as well as religion, age, and other influences that have shaped who we are today. We begin with ourselves and then work with everyone in our community to build awareness, understanding, and readiness to overcome stereotypes, biases, inequitable policies or structures, and other constraints related to our social identities. We build an environment in which people of all social identities are valued and embraced as their full selves. Leaders can take part in this process and provide time for staff members to safely reflect and choose what to share within their comfort zone.

- 5. Social and emotional safety** is created by supporting students in defining their identities, refuting negative stereotypes, and countering stereotype threat, giving them a voice in the classroom while using social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies.

Leaders can ensure that their staff recognize the powerful alliance between academic achievement and a culture of social emotional support. The cognitive and affective parts of ourselves are constantly interacting when we learn. As leaders develop prosocial skills and engage in positive relationships, including the ability to collaborate, they prepare students for school and beyond. The identity safe leader models and practices positive social and emotional skills, understands

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trauma-informed practice, and supports staff in integrating social and emotional learning throughout their curriculum.

6. **Student learning** is enhanced in diverse classrooms by teaching for understanding, creating opportunities for shared inquiry and dialogue, and offering a challenging, rigorous curriculum.

Identity safe leaders demonstrate strong instructional leadership as they work to ensure student-centered teaching practices, which include teaching for understanding while upholding rigor, challenging leaders to secure a robust curriculum tailored to students' needs. These leaders are well versed in curriculum and instruction and stay abreast of new research and best practices. They are open to meaningful feedback from data, surveys, and personal interviews from all stakeholders. They use it to inform their practice, adjusting for optimal results to support rigorous teaching and learning in identity safe ways. They are adept at facilitating staff in collaborating to meet the wide range of academic needs, thereby devolving from an old model of top-down authority where methods and desired results were merely dictated.

7. **Schoolwide equity** flourishes for everyone in identity safe schools where the climate, the structures, practices, and attitudes prioritize equity, inclusion, and academic growth for students from all backgrounds. Leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence; attend to student needs; address racism, bias, and privilege; and serve as the architects of ongoing change.

Equitable policies and practices can be a galvanizing force to help reverse the effects of long-standing racist school systems. Leaders give attention to how resources are fairly deployed to support achievement for students of color. They ensure disciplinary practices are not biased. They provide English language services for students and establish policies to address racial slurs and prevent bullying and teasing. They equip schools with gender-neutral bathrooms and allow transgender students to use bathrooms that match their gender identity. They ensure that staff get the training and resources needed to develop and thrive as culturally responsive educators.

Strong leadership spreads identity safety at an exponential rate, but this doesn't mean change relies solely on one leader. Successful leaders establish multiple helms with copilots to accommodate the myriad needs of the community in service to the students. Distributed leadership structures, such as role-alike teams and multistakeholder

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school councils, will further expand how the school is shaped by the voices and knowledge of the community. As we stated in Chapter 1, influential leaders may not always hold positional power; rather, they leverage their roles to influence change.

A review of research (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) for how leadership influences student learning states that

successful leadership can play a highly significant—and frequently underestimated—role in improving student learning. Specifically, the available evidence about the size and nature of the effects of successful leadership on student learning justifies two important claims: 1. Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, . . . and 2. Leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most. (p. 5)

To the second point, the report explains, “Existing research shows that demonstrated effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances. Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst” (p. 5).

In addition to the two claims stated above, we identify in the “Why It Matters” section two significant reasons why leadership matters specifically in an identity safe school: the importance of an ethical stance reflected in all our actions and the power of equity-centered leadership. We also consider some of the different challenges faced by White leaders and leaders of color.

In the “Making It Happen” section, we describe the leadership stances (the stands we take that reflect our attitudes and beliefs) that serve us for the impetus and motivation they provide to all of our decisions. They include equity consciousness, cultural humility, a growth mindset, and compassion. We also consider the skills and competence—which can often be gained from practice—that we believe will help move your school toward identity safety. This includes self-awareness, listening and engaging others, relationship-building, instructional leadership, problem-solving, and consensus-building and change management. While leadership is a broad topic with many books written about it, we have opted to target specific stances and skills most needed for an identity safe school. We then add approaches for working with staff, which include diversifying, supervising, and retaining staff. In Chapter 7 we offer examples of planning processes on how to achieve an identity safe campus.

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Why It Matters

ETHICS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CHANGING TIMES

According to Michael Fullan (2001), the imperative of rapid changes (which can encompass societal and governmental upheavals, or cultural changes within a single school) necessitates leadership that is capable of incorporating moral purpose, understanding change, developing relationships, knowledge-building, and coherence-making. In an identity safe school, leaders direct their moral compass toward student learning and social and emotional needs, which form the basis for every decision. Relationships guide all interactions, placing it within a leader's purview to prioritize building strong relationships with groups and between individuals.

Fullan (2001) describes moral purpose as a leader's motivation to seek positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Moral purpose starts with a clear understanding of one's own values and a willingness to examine how they manifest in both small and large decisions, affecting all their actions (O'Neil, 1996). The identity safe leader is guided by a primary attitude of compassion and fairness, coupled with a desire to contribute to the well-being of others. With a world in flux, a leader works to at once understand the change process, adapt to the constantly changing conditions, and build coherence into the process while remaining a solid and steady support for others. Leaders keep their ship afloat, continually tracking newly arising information while also serving as an anchor for their stakeholders. Fullan (2001) compared a thriving learning organization to a living system where entities actually experience the most risk during times when they are static. He suggests that when conditions of threat push organisms to the brink of danger, an effective leader will lead to the times when they experiment, mutate, or reorganize and renew themselves to survive.

For identity safe educators, their internal vision and moral compass, which guides them toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, can help them prioritize to determine what is most important. Our compass guides our intuition, good will, and judgment in the wake of the external pressures, unintended consequences, and mandates that continually bombard us.

In Chapter 1, we address "othering" as a habit of categorizing individuals and groups based on identifiable and manufactured differences with an intent to establish superiority as well as manipulate and dominate those categorized as "other." Identity safe leaders seek out the nuances of how othering operates in subtle and not-so-subtle ways in systems. By taking into consideration historical and cultural aspects of the impact of white supremacy, we work to mitigate the inappropriate use of power and privilege (Bogotch & Shields, 2014).

Likely all of us have seen the impact of a weak leader. The weakness may lie in an inability to communicate accurately, compassionately, or fairly. In other cases, a leader may neglect to follow through on projects or promises. The results can be devastating—in a short time, the culture of a school can erode, morale plummets, and even a staff exodus can ensue. The evidence can be seen on the tense faces of staff, and eventually it takes its toll through the erratic behavior of students, ultimately affecting their achievement.

Conversely, a dynamic leader with a strong moral compass can transform a school from a place where nobody wants to work, where parents/caregivers do not want to send their children, to a place where parents/caregivers are lining up to attend. How can a leader accomplish this? It starts with building trust, in showing the community you care, that you are willing to take hard stands and keep your promises. If you reach out to involve students and families, they will join you to forge a shared vision—one based on identity safe practices, anti-racism, and educational equity. Then, together you can nurture a school culture based on a collective vision. The school community wants to see that you can effectively manage operations and resources, remove obstacles, and solve problems while empowering teams to ensure student success. Powerful teaching and learning are not simply the results of expert principals who espouse a vision of desired results but rather teams of educators who are empowered to work together.

ETHICS AND EQUITY-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

All duties ascribed to an administrator gain an added ethical dimension when viewed through an equity lens. This dimension does not require harder work or more time but rather illuminates all decisions and school interactions. This applies to everything from curricular planning, student referrals, discipline, and disciplinary hearings, and to interactions such as yard and hallway supervision. Administrators also use their equity lens as they recruit and hire, and establish meeting and training topics and activities. Their lens is adjusted as well when they supervise teachers and make decisions about tenure.

Positionality, Power, and Privilege

It is not enough to claim identification for not being a racist person. “Not being racist” describes a passive position that does nothing to alleviate real-world conditions for racism.

The opposite of racist isn’t “not racist.” It is “anti-racist.” What’s the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an anti-racist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems

in power and policies, as an anti-racist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between space of “not racist.” (Kendi, 2019, p. 9)

Identity safe leaders understand this difference. There is no middle road for taking a stand against racism. Yes, it does entail some of the hardest work to initiate and sustain change, but on the other side of that bridge lies some of the most rewarding experiences available for educators: a community aligned with the same values, working toward the same goals—not in spite of, but in celebration of their differences. Toward this end, we engage in self-reflection and develop self-awareness on how power, privilege, and oppression impact us personally as well as historically. Regardless of our identity markers, we have all grown up in a racist system. Like fish who are accustomed to living in polluted waters, we often do not see it. Taking a stance as anti-racists, it behooves all leaders to look deeply at positionality and privilege.

Whether you are a person with positional or influential power, you need to carefully consider how power in itself affords privilege. This requires your consideration on how to use it. We all have power over some situations and lack power in others. We do well to hold ourselves in check with the authority assigned to us and consider how to best use our measure of power to elevate the voices of others. At other times, we use our voice to speak the truth to power while standing for fairness and social justice. The process of tackling issues of equity and anti-racism is challenging for all leaders, but it is worth considering some particular challenges faced by leaders of color and different challenges that White leaders face as they undertake school transformation.

Leaders of Color and White Leaders Face Different Challenges

According to a survey of superintendents (Modan, 2020), White males dominate the field. The number of superintendents of color rose from 5% in 2000 to 8.6% in 2020. The number of female superintendents rose from 13% in 2000 to 26% in 2020. Site leadership is dominated by White males as well, while classrooms are dominated by White female teachers. These numbers leave us with a long way to go to mirror the population these leaders should represent. Many leaders of color walk a tightrope in retaining employment and negotiating with systems that often place many stumbling blocks in their path. Hiring teams often use the phrase “it’s just not a match,” which allows them to pass over a Black or Latinx principal candidate without having their personal biases challenged. A 2017 Harvard University study showed persistent racial discrimination in hiring against Black and Latinx Americans with little or no change over the last 25 years (Quillian, et al., 2017).

In 2020, Vice President Kamala Harris was the first woman of color to represent a major party on the presidential debate stage. A *New York Times* article titled “Kamala

Harris and the ‘Double Bind’ of Racism and Sexism” (Astor, 2020) depicted the challenges she faced, which ranged from name-calling by members of the opposing party to relentless criticism that she was too strong or opinionated. The article described how she had to walk a fine line between stereotypes of women as the weaker sex and an old racist trope targeting the “angry Black woman,” characterized as emasculating, aggressive, and hostile. Identity safe schools seek to diversify the field of school leadership, revising hiring practices and refuting the stereotypes and double standards applied to leaders and all educators of color.

Considerations for Leaders of Color

Brandy, a Black leader, was promoted from teacher, to coach, to principal in a school in Arizona where she had worked for 15 years. The first year as principal, she found herself constantly having to prove herself to the parent community. They often asked intrusive questions about her credentials and experience, ignoring the many years she had given to their community that led to her selection as principal.

For leaders of color, personal understanding of the experiences and perspectives of people of color, as well as awareness of racist tendencies or implicit bias from Whites—including those with authority over them—will help in considering in advance ways to handle sensitive situations or additional pressures. A Black principal may be accused of only caring about Black students. A White parent may complain that efforts to create equitable conditions for students they perceive as different from their own will detract resources and advantage from their children. Leaders can educate the community that equity will not lead to a zero-sum game with winners and losers. A win for any subgroup or even one person in this context is a win for all.

Self-reflection provides a space for leaders of color to unpack tensions and build resilience for responding to the biases of others, as well as recognizing their own biases. In the book *Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building*, Donna K. Bivens (2005), author of the chapter “What Is Internalized Racism?,” writes,

As people of color are victimized by racism, we internalize it. That is, we develop ideas, beliefs, actions, and behaviors that support or collude with racism. This internalized racism has its own systemic reality, and its own negative consequences in the lives and communities of people of color. More than just a consequence of racism, then, internalized racism is a systemic oppression in reaction to racism that has a life of its own. In other words, just as there is a system in place that reinforces the power and expands the privilege of White people, there is a system in place that actively discourages and undermines the power of people of color. (p. 44)

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It's easy for a leader of color to feel alone in an educational setting where White staff dominate. It can help immeasurably to connect with others outside your place of work, if needed, to establish a community. You can benefit from participating in support groups and networks such as the National Alliance of Black School Educators (<https://www.nabse.org/>), Education Leaders of Color (<https://edloc.org/>), the National Indian Education Association (<https://www.niea.org/>), Latinos for Education (<https://www.latinosforeducation.org/about-us/>), and Asian American Youth Leadership and Empowerment (<https://www.aalead.org/>).

Considerations for White Leaders

For White leaders, attending to power and privilege is foundational for an identity safe school. A White leader holds both white privilege and positional authority. By acknowledging white privilege and taking steady action to ensure equal status and opportunity for all community members, a White leader builds trust for their positional authority. When white privilege goes unaddressed, this trust is fragile or missing, particularly when working with people of color and other historically marginalized groups. White leaders can come to understand that white privilege is always in play. Even when they don't intend to leverage it as power, it remains. This is expressed first and foremost by the very fact that a White leader holds a position of power in a system that systematically denies that access to people of color (Jones, 2020).

Cultural humility, an invaluable tool for White leaders, describes an interpersonal stance that centers on understanding and responding to aspects of cultural identity and experience that are most important to others (Waters & Asbill, 2013). White people are generally not raised to "see" racism or to see how color defines many aspects of experience and opportunity in society. During the spring 2020 racial justice uprising, many White people became newly aware of systemic racism, an awareness that people of color do not have the option to avoid. Cultural humility acknowledges these gaps in awareness and knowledge and directs them to start from a place of listening and witnessing.

White leaders can take a multifaceted approach to listening and witnessing to avoid inadvertently placing the burden of teaching on a small number of people of color that they work with or serve. This includes sustaining representative, diverse stakeholder structures discussed throughout this book, such as parent/caregiver advisory councils, racial and other types of affinity groups, and broader community dialogue and activist networks. White leaders can also listen and witness—and use what they read and watch—to seek, hear, and respond to a diverse range of voices.

For identity safety to thrive, White leaders work to model and assist other White people to develop a positive racial identity. In her 1992 book *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have*, Janet Helms outlines a six-stage framework of positive White

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identity development. White leaders represent and encounter development all along this spectrum, from the person who doesn't see themselves as White and embraces colorblindness, to the person committed to evolving through steady action to be anti-racist. Books such as *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have* (Helms, 1992) and *How to Be an Anti-Racist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019), as well as training such as offered by Embracing Equity (<https://embracingequity.org/>) and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) (<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/>) are invaluable resources for leading this critical aspect of the work.

One White Leader's Journey

Joe Erpelding was raised in a Catholic family in a white neighborhood. It was all he had known before his father sent him to an intermediate magnet school where he met students from many different backgrounds and ethnicities. He feels grateful today for that exposure to different cultures, yet nothing prepared him for the day when he was a principal at Design 39, a TK-8 grade elementary school, and was approached by Chas, a Black parent. Chas told Erpelding that Black students were being called the N-word and asked, "What are you going to do about it?" Joe thought (with a measure of trepidation in light of his inexperience), "What am I going to do about it?" He decided to bring together the Black parents in the school for a meeting to discuss the issue. He was nervous, but he understood himself as a person willing to be "led by challenge," and with this attitude, he approached the room where they were to meet.

This became the first meeting of many for Joe and the "Small and Mighty" group of Black parents, as they came to be known. They took Joe under their wing, and by his testimony, taught him much. They began with the understanding that they were going to engage in "real talk," and not allow the truth to be hijacked from an overabundance of politeness. Joe knew he needed an education. Amon, a member of the group, informed Joe that "there are two Americas," and explained what it meant for his son and himself to simply leave the house and go somewhere, anywhere, in their car. They had to make certain that they had their driver's licenses and insurance cards ready to grab and show in case they were stopped by the police. They also had to remember, as Black males, to shuffle their feet in a parking garage so as not to surprise or frighten anyone. One of the parents told Joe, "I don't need you to talk for me, I just need you to stand by me." Joe learned that as a White male, he could use his positional power to bring opportunities to the group. He did, and they accomplished much together, which is detailed in Chapter 5. Joe and the "Small and Mighty" parents continue their work in the district because, as Chas stated emphatically in an online Town Hall meeting with the parent community, "At the end of the day, it's about our children."

For White leaders, attending to their power and privilege will better attune them to the needs of students whose backgrounds are different from theirs. They can increase their awareness of those times that they display implicit bias or express microaggressions, and work to change their attitudes and behaviors. Attending to these sensitivities, they will also be better prepared for moments when they receive “charged” feedback implicating them as racist or advocates of racist policies or attitudes. A centered, anti-racist approach can enable them to listen and refrain from defensive and reactive responses, or fall into traps of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). Furthermore, once leaders acknowledge privilege, they can use it to benefit identity safety for all.

Challenging Our Biases

Educational leaders of all backgrounds can become attuned to biases within themselves and others—the latter with an intent to observe, educate, and mitigate when necessary. The responsibility for learning about the experiences of people with a host of targeted social identities (gender, social class, disability) and intersectional identities extends to all of us. In service to our self-reflection, asking questions can help identify blind spots, which includes uncovering personal perspectives that pertain to people outside our social or identity group.

When working to create identity safe schools, it is important to acknowledge the diversity that exists within every group, including race, ethnicity, and culture. Gender identities, for example, are varied in all ethnic groups. Among Blacks, there are African Americans, African immigrants, Caribbean Blacks, and more. Among Latinx, we find people born in the United States and immigrants from Mexican, Central American, and South American countries—each with different customs and traditions. Asians also have varied backgrounds from many different countries and experiences. Indigenous people belong to many tribes. Lumping and labeling people into homogenous groups invites unsubstantiated assumptions that lead to stereotyping.

People from all ethnic groups engage, at times, in biased attitudes and behaviors within their group. Examples include some communities of color that have grown up with colorism, the attitude that lighter skin is more beautiful and acceptable, or terms like “FOB” (fresh off the boat) and “ABC” (American-born Chinese), which are used by some members of the Chinese American community to emphasize social hierarchies. Leaders can also deepen their understanding of the complexities of intersectionality for oppressed identities, such as a transgender/Latinx person or a Black/Muslim. With a keen eye on what we want to accomplish, we can uncover and work to rectify the subtle and not-so-subtle inequities, both real and perceived, that emerge as we lead diverse communities.

As we take on the challenge of identity safe leadership, we keep our moral purpose and our commitment to equity-centered leadership in our minds and hearts at all times. By openly acknowledging our positionality as leaders—and our awareness of the power and privilege it affords us—we will be ready to take on the challenge of leading a diverse community. As we work to actualize these commitments, we enhance our allyship with youth and adults. From here, we examine how identity safe leaders can make it happen.

Making It Happen

When we view everything through an identity safe lens in our work, certain attitudes, stances, and skills will naturally present themselves. In this section, we will identify the most important attributes in this regard as you calibrate your own lens and take action. You can select those traits first that you feel will most benefit your growth as an equity-minded leader.

We have selected some specific areas of focus for stances to adopt while prioritizing for identity safe school transformation. From there, we target specific skills needed by an identity safe leader seeking to make transformative change. We conclude the section with a focus on the leader's role in human resources.

THE STANCES OF AN IDENTITY SAFE LEADER

Our stances determine how we show up in our lives, in our work, and in the world. They actuate our frame of mind, opinions, and the words we speak. They guide our decisions. Stances that speak to identity safety include the following:

- **Equity consciousness:** An awareness and commitment to equity and social justice.
- **Cultural humility:** Awareness of multiple perspectives with an intent to understand and respect differences in backgrounds and beliefs.
- **Growth mindset:** An understanding that everyone is continually growing and learning and gaining knowledge as they go. A leader's growth mindset stance serves as a model for others.
- **Compassion:** An attitude and a way of seeing and being with ourselves and others where we seek to alleviate harm and suffering (Greater Good Science Center, n.d.).

Equity Consciousness

Identity safe leaders develop an awareness of the level of equity and inequity present in behaviors, policies, settings, organizations, and outcomes. In identity safe schools, diversity as a resource is manifested by giving students plentiful opportunities to share their life experiences in multiple classes and over the span of their entire school years.

Identity Safe Practices at Humanitas Academy

A Leadership Policy Institute case study (Ondrasek & Flook, 2018) about the Social Justice Humanitas Academy in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) describes how students are offered many opportunities to integrate their identities and lives into the content of the curriculum. In one example, ninth graders do a deep dive into their personal histories and consider them in the context of what is going on in the world. In one example, students read *Always Running*, a memoir by Luis Rodriguez (2005), where the author describes his youth on the streets of East L.A. After reading the book, students wrote essays analyzing how the author overcame the obstacles in his life and became self-actualized (one of their school's core values). Their essays identified “cultural wealth—including aspirational, familial, and navigational capital—and grit as important resources for overcoming trauma and achieving self-actualization. Their essays highlight the types of deep engagement that culturally responsive pedagogy can foster” (Ondrasek & Flook, 2018, para. 29).

In 2018, when the case study was completed, Humanitas students enjoyed a high graduation rate, with over 80% of the students achieving college and career readiness. In a district survey, Humanitas students reported feeling safe at school, a positive sense of belonging, and acceptance at school. Ninety percent said that “adults at my school treat students with respect,” and 88% indicated that they “feel they have a voice in decision making,” compared to only a quarter of students in the rest of the district (Ondrasek & Flook, 2018, para. 33). Ondrasek and Flook (2018) observed that “identity safety doesn't emerge from just one approach. With a multitude of practices in place—such as those at Humanitas—students from diverse backgrounds can come to understand that their social identities are wholly compatible with educational achievement, and that their unique perspectives add value to their communities, both within the classroom and beyond” (para. 35). In concert with this sentiment, Juan Miramontes, a senior at UC Berkeley, is quoted on the Humanitas website stating, “The academics got me here, but it is the values and love SJHA instilled in me that gets me through” (Humanitas, n.d.).

Identity safe leaders provide for the expression of diverse voices and perspectives in every aspect of school life. This includes noticing which students are called upon to speak and which ones sit silent in their classrooms. Safeguarding fair choices for students to participate on the debate team or enjoy representation on the student council are within the scope of an identity safe leader. When they see a discrepancy, they can work to increase access and representation.

Nancy, a principal in Wisconsin, recounts,

There used to be a lot of hand-wringing that there were hardly any students of color in Advanced Placement classes. I posed the issue to the subject matter departments and asked them to come up with solutions. The English Department returned with a proposal to stop tracking all incoming ninth graders. We had pushback from some parents who were worried that mixed ability groupings would dumb down curriculum and set their children back. I assured them that all classes would embody high standards. This was just a first step for us. We will monitor carefully and see what worked and what we need to tweak. I am hoping other departments will follow.

Egalitarian structures, where all voices are heard in mixed-ability groups, show everyone that their thoughts, ideas, and opinions matter.

This recognition for group diversity and integration of specific student identities into the curriculum and classroom practices will promote a sense of equity and equal value for all.

Cultural Humility

When we engage in cultural humility, we understand that we don't know everything there is to know about other cultures, and we humble ourselves with that presumption. This means we clear out any of our own preconceived inner biases, not just once, but throughout our lives as new ones arise. Only then are we prepared to listen to others—and keep listening—for experiences are always in flux. We allow for the changing sensibilities and ideas others express and share about their cultures as new events and circumstances develop in their lives. We remain open and listening.

This process begins with understanding ourselves in regard to culture. We consider our judgments—we search for and identify our implicit and explicit biases—and we seek to suspend them and avoid assumptions about people from other cultures and backgrounds. We respectfully approach people who are different from us with an open mind and an interest in learning more. While we aim to treat people of all

social identities with kindness and compassion, we recognize that we have much to learn from people who do not share our social identities. Orienting toward compassion for others is a way of opening our hearts and minds to see, understand, and empathize with a sense of humility. It provides us with a willingness to presume nothing and a desire to learn. Many well-intentioned efforts by White people to be culturally responsive operate from a perspective of whiteness as a norm, without realizing that people of color are often treated as the “other.” White leaders can acknowledge power imbalances and seek to rectify them. They can work to understand how that might affect people of color and their responses to White leaders. The stance of cultural humility requires a lifelong commitment to self-reflection on our attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Growth Mindset

When we nurture a growth mindset in ourselves, we cultivate a habit to remain open and flexible, always learning and growing. When new circumstances or information arise, we develop a mindset to receive the new input and integrate it with and balance it against what we already know. This can lead to innovation and many new ideas, while we adjust and learn from our mistakes as well. In this manner, we not only are able to mature our thinking and plans, but as leaders we are positioned to support both adults and students around us to develop their cognitive and emotional intelligence—as well as their talents and abilities—by encouraging their efforts to learn. With a growth mindset, we focus on the process and the journey, not simply the outcome. When we confront obstacles and make mistakes, which is inevitable as we lead and manage a school, we seek to learn from them while we avoid pointing fingers and blaming others. We take accountability for our actions, share our vulnerabilities, and aim for transparency with our communities.

When leaders model a growth mindset, they set the stage for classroom teachers to follow suit. The stance can become a way of abiding in flexibility for everyone. According to Carol Dweck (Cohn-Vargas, et al., 2020), when identity safe teaching is integrated with a growth mindset approach, students are able “to continually grow and reach their highest potential.”

Compassion

Author Kristin Neff (2020) writes, “Compassion engages our capacity for love, wisdom, courage, and generosity. It’s a mental and emotional state that’s boundless and directionless . . . available to every person simply by virtue of our being human” (para 21). Orienting ourselves toward compassion is manifest in three ways: compassion toward others, receiving compassion from others, and compassion for ourselves (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020). All three ways lead to deeper understanding and acceptance and healing. As we turn “toward each other,” we exercise the capacity to

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support and nurture one another. Compassion is essential for establishing a climate of identity safety. Without it, a leader's relationships with staff, students, and the community will experience a reduced impact on both their work and their creative energies. A stance of compassion adds great value for stabilizing the sometimes unpredictable challenges that can crop up in the change process. It provides us with a lens to view all exchanges and events without fear, and it prompts us to approach others with language that affirms, assures, and strengthens everyone's stance to keep the faith and persevere.

Moving beyond personal stances that lead to identity safety, we examine the skills that will help leaders rally others to stand with them. When stakeholders are on board, an identity safe leader will support the team with skill-building, designing, and managing change processes that will move the school ahead.

SKILLS OF IDENTITY SAFE LEADERS

To be a leader of a complex system is challenging. We are each naturally endowed with aptitudes. Other competencies are gained from study, practice, and experience. We all excel in different ways. Some leaders enjoy interpersonal skills that enable them to motivate others, bringing groups of people together to create a sense of team, or—even better—a sense of family. Some are great at delegating tasks; others excel as dynamic speakers. Yet still more are attracted to data and use it to drive toward concrete results. Some are clear thinkers in a crisis or shine as problem-solvers. It isn't necessary to perform well in all areas when we begin, but ultimately strong interpersonal skills, in particular, are needed to manage change. It is within each of us to activate our established skills, learn new ones, and realize our untapped potential.

Personal leadership refers to the qualities that leaders manifest through social and emotional intelligence, which is not exclusive to any particular style of leadership or personalities. Each leader develops their unique style for expressing these valuable proficiencies. When we feel comfortable with our own range of emotions, we are better equipped to recognize and respect the feelings of others, promoting their ease and ours. People quickly perceive our reception of them, which will direct their responses. The moment we face students and their families, they can feel our sense of worth for them. Our desire to understand them will allow us to receive them in a way that they feel seen and heard. Strong personal leadership skills include relational and communication competencies needed for connecting with staff, students, families, and the community. This also includes the capacity to attend to student needs while dealing successfully as a conduit between the district, the community, and the staff. Our skills also help us to accept feedback without becoming defensive. We are ready to step up and effectively call out and redress

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bias and speak truth to power, including supervisors and other district leaders. Here are some of the skills and abilities that contribute to identity safe schools, which we shall address in the following sections:

- Self-awareness
- Relationship-building
- Listening and engaging others
- Instructional leadership
- Problem-solving and consensus-building
- Change management

Self-Awareness

Taking time to cultivate the practice of self-reflection launches the process for becoming an identity safety leader for students of all backgrounds, races, gender identities, religious affiliations, as well as all forms of intersectionality. As a continual practice, self-reflection guides leaders in all of their functions (Horng, et al., 2009). This laser focus, especially as it is practiced in the long haul, strengthens the confidence and courage needed to take strong stands on behalf of students and staff, or when a member of the community is targeted by bigotry or hate.

When we create a thoughtful space alone with the breathing room to build our resilience, we can better realize the tools we need to create a positive school climate. We are better prepared to address the microaggressions, counter negative stereotypes, and resolve conflicts that will certainly arise. Each person finds their own method of self-reflection. Some like to keep a journal, others do quiet meditation, while still others choose to talk through their thoughts and feelings with a confidante. The latter can make a great difference when we find a trusted friend or mentor with whom to process our reflections. We can share complex situations with them, checking for balance and clarity. They can also offer trusted and personal feedback as we work to improve ourselves as leaders.

An aspect of self-reflection for identity safe leaders involves shifting our internal focus to our own social identities. This prepares us to respond to the identities and social-emotional needs of students and staff with compassion and agility. In our self-examination, we unearth beliefs and attitudes, and we examine them for evidence of implicit and explicit biases. Most often, these biases were formed as children, before we developed the cognitive abilities to question their validity. We can, however,

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question them now. In service to our self-reflection, we shed light upon our blind spots by remaining alert to our passing thoughts and feelings and catching those moments when we hear ourselves judging or stereotyping a person or a group who is different from us. These watchful exercises are beneficial for leaders of all ethnicities and backgrounds. In effect, we clear our own inner canvas, gaining the clarity to bridge toward understanding the perspectives of people outside our social or identity group. We learn about others and remain ever ready with the courage to listen and speak up, openly expressing our vulnerabilities and protecting the sensitivities of others. Our growth in this skill set empowers us to address biased behaviors wherever we find them. We are better prepared to strengthen our capacity to acknowledge and learn from mistakes, take accountability for our actions, and attend to how others perceive us. In turn, this empowers us to better understand ourselves in a healthy cycle that reinforces our abilities to respond to the social-emotional needs of others appropriately. Reading books by anti-racist educators and attending self-awareness workshops and study groups also greatly assist the process of building awareness and a compendium for the large and varied social identities that can exist within a community.

In the “Using the Tools” section at the end of the chapter, we have identified a series of questions that will help you in this process. In Chapter 3, we describe self-reflective processes for staff, and in Appendix B you can find an additional Staff Self-Reflection Activity.

Relationship-Building

In Chapter 1, we highlighted the power of positive relationships as an essential ingredient that impacts every aspect of leadership. Additionally, relationships with and among students emerged as a key identity safe teaching component from the Stanford Integrated Schools Project (SISP) identity safe research (D. M. Steele, 2012). The same applies with adults. Many leaders are adept at the skill of building and sustaining positive relationships. For all relationships to be identity safe, we seek to foster acceptance, inclusion, and mutual respect in the context of a collaborative culture.

Leaders cannot execute the entire transformation of a school alone. By creating collaborative structures and processes, they empower stakeholders as shared participants in school change. Leaders are able to welcome a range of contributions to a learning organization, sharing in the habit of adapting and adjusting. By drawing on teacher leaders, TSAs (teachers on special assignment), mentors, and master teachers, leaders can empower a growing team to work on extending identity safe practices. Together, they can work with the staff to incorporate behaviors that will lead to well-being, equal status, and agency for students. Team members can be trained to model effective practices for their colleagues. Often, a respected colleague can make all the difference where other approaches may fail.

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A Team Effort to Make School Safer for Transgender Students

When identity safe leaders have strong relationships with their staff teams, they are more likely to be successful when working to unpack practices that harm students and undo unfair policies. For example, at one school in Illinois, a survey alerted the principal that transgender students did not feel safe at the school. However, much of the staff had limited knowledge and experience for understanding and supporting transgender students. The principal invited a consultant from a national organization, Gender Spectrum (<https://www.genderspectrum.org/>), to lead a professional development session with staff to increase awareness of transgender student experiences and the challenges facing them. Following the session, leaders—together with several teachers—held a focus group with several transgender students. The focus group discussion revealed that students who had changed their names to match their transitioned identity felt uncomfortable from their first day in a new class when the teacher read their name off the roster, because it was their former name, which no longer represented their identities. The school's data system had not allowed students to change from the names that were listed when they first enrolled in school as children. The focus group leaders went back to Gender Spectrum to find out what other schools had done to reset their data systems. Using this new knowledge, they contacted the company in charge of their data system and were able to make the name changes and create a safer space in school for transgender students.

Relationships are nurtured through many different interactions—formal and informal—as well as when confronting challenging situations (e.g., giving support to a staff member who is having difficulty, or when grappling with a crisis). Strong relationships that engage with trust and bridge differences begin with listening.

Listening and Engaging Others

Identity safe leaders connect with students, staff, and the community by employing deep listening skills. This leadership skill is parallel to the SISP component called *listening for student voices*, which we apply here to include the entire school community (D. M. Steele, 2012). We can intentionally strengthen our capacity to actively listen to a range of student, staff, and community voices. Listening with humility includes attending to the words as well as the nonverbal cues—gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. We seek to listen in a nonjudgmental fashion and take care not to interrupt as we create meaning from a person's ideas,

experiences, points of view, and the stories they share with us. We check for understanding by asking clarifying questions, paraphrasing, or summarizing to invite mutual understanding.

Louise Waters shares her wisdom and experience from her long career as an equity-focused educational leader, teacher, principal, superintendent, and education professor. In this story, she relates her motivation to start a “listening campaign,” which she initiated in her first years as principal in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school accommodated a wide range of diversity, with 40% of the students’ families earning incomes below the poverty line, and no single ethnicity greater than 20%. Most families came from immigrant backgrounds. She says,

Although I had lived in the community for 15 years, I undertook a listening campaign in order to see through my new eyes as a principal. During the summer before school opened, I met individually with each staff member to listen to their hopes and fears, and hear them describe the school’s strengths and weaknesses. I also held a series of parent meetings—some general and others specific to each ethnic/language group. The information I gleaned was invaluable. It allowed me to find the landmines and points of commonality and to begin to build trust. It also helped me frame my first staff meetings, knowing the points of entry, early wins, as well as issues to defer. Allies I acquired then kept me apprised of hot topics, smoldering tensions and opportunities over my eight-year tenure.

For Waters, the listening allowed her to understand the different needs of the immigrant students and break down stereotypes. She explains,

Before my interactions, I knew the communities had different needs and experiences but I knew little about the particulars or the tremendous variations within each group. Most of the Afghan families were refugees but some came from the educated elite whose parents spoke English. Often these students outperformed their American peers, particularly in math. Others had been Mujahedeen living through war and refugee camps with limited formal schooling, and perhaps with family members still unaccounted. The needs of the particular students were different, and that range was repeated in the other immigrant groups. Listening taught me to be wary of generalizations.

Waters’s listening campaign led to the development of language academies where students strengthened their primary language skills in Spanish, Tagalog, Farsi, Vietnamese, and Punjabi. The English speakers learned Spanish. She concludes, “Before the Language Academies, I had very little knowledge of the cultures, the

expectations for schools and teachers, or the experiences of these families, and the knowledge I needed to adequately respond to their students' needs.”

Leaders also work to strengthen listening skills across the school community. In one charter network, leaders adopted a set of equity principles to anchor listening and engagement in every meeting, discussion, and decision:

1. Cultivate equity consciousness, including awareness of subtle bias and inequity. Become aware of the level of equity and inequity present in behaviors, policies, settings, organizations, and outcomes.
2. Engage in self-awareness and reflection. Foster an understanding of one's identity, values, biases, assumptions, and privileges.
3. Listen to, and elevate the voices of the most marginalized and most affected.
4. Respond to biases and inequities in the immediate term. Connect small “micro” issues to “macro” context, framing equity as a larger social issue.
5. Identify and undertake equity action(s). As you consider action, include your thinking and processing from Steps 1–4.

Throughout this book, we circle back to the topic of listening. You will find references to cultivate active listening with staff in Chapter 3, and with families and the community in Chapter 5.

Instructional Leadership

An identity safe leader recognizes that the ultimate goal for students involves providing access to teaching that will lead to their authentic learning and progressing. The SISP (D. M. Steele, 2012) research demonstrated that when students feel identity safe, they perform better academically. The research identified four academic components that lead to identity safety for students: *listening for student voices*, *teaching for understanding*, *focusing on cooperation*, and *student autonomy*. Identity safe leaders keep these components in mind as they develop an ambitious vision of academic excellence. This vision is rooted in rigor with high expectations, supported by appropriate scaffolding, and inspired by the goal of leading the students toward opportunities and choices to further their education and, ultimately, find meaningful careers. Using deeper learning strategies, students probe their ideas, formulate questions, and critically analyze solutions. Aisha, a high school English teacher, specifically asks her

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students, “Can you take that idea a bit deeper to help us understand your thinking?” Randy, a third-grade teacher, asks, “Who can look at the problem in a different way and tell us why you think that?”

These leaders are also aware that this instructional vision can only be accomplished when students’ social identities are wedded to a strong academic identity by educators in and outside the classroom. To realize this, educator performance, data analysis, and a shared commitment to equity each need consideration. Leaders empower staff, students, and parents/caregivers with a voice in developing and realizing the instructional vision.

A Tale of Two Districts

Researcher and author Pedro Noguera (2017) carried out a case study with multiple districts that included an extensive analysis of several efforts to close achievement gaps. Here we highlight two districts: the Ocean School District in California (a pseudonym) and the Brockton High School in Massachusetts, whose name was not changed because various articles celebrate their achievements.

Ocean School District, CA

In the Ocean School District, White students constituted over 50% of the school population, with smaller numbers of Asian, Black, and Latinx students. Noguera explains that for over 20 years, the district had engaged in a variety of efforts to address the achievement disparities between the White and Asian students, and the Black and Latinx students. However, the district was unable to make sustained change in the gaps nor significantly improve academic outcomes for Black and Latinx students. Their 2015 case study uncovered a staggering 43% of Black students and 40% of Latinx students enrolled in special education, in contrast to only 8% of White students. Noguera explains that the study revealed a series of factors impeding change: a “high rate of turnover in leadership at the district and site level; a failure to implement and evaluate new initiatives aimed at improving teaching; a lack of fidelity in implementation; political distractions; and a wide variety of institutional obstacles.” Most importantly, the study found that there was a lack of clear and consistent focus on how to deliver high-quality instructional support for all students. They also found that most teachers were not using critical thinking strategies or deeper learning activities.

Brockton High School (BHS), MA

With a student population of 4,200, Brockton High School has a student body that is 60% Black (including African Americans, Africans, Haitians, and Cape Verdeans), 22% White, and smaller percentages of Latinx, Asian, and mixed students. Seventy-six percent come

from low-income families, and they have a large immigrant population. In 2002, the school was ranked lowest in the state. Over the next five years, teacher leaders formed a restructuring committee focused on deeper learning, which engaged in strategies that mirror the following identity safety components:

- **Teaching for Understanding:** higher-order thinking activities and a literacy focus that includes analysis of literature.
- **Listening for Student Voices:** open-response writing where students express what is meaningful to them.
- **Focus on Cooperation and Student Autonomy:** Project-based learning, Socratic seminars, and other collaborative activities; adults also collaborated closely in improvement efforts.

Steadily, the school improved with a coherent and consistent focus on deeper learning. With 97% of students progressing to higher education, BHS was awarded Bronze Medals (in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013) in the Best High Schools Rankings by *U.S. News & World Report* and has been recognized as a National Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education for 11 consecutive years (Noguera, 2017).

My (Alex) journey toward formal school leadership began swiftly. As the beginning of the school year preparations began, one of our site leaders left due to personal circumstances. Three weeks before the school year began, I was approached by our principal to step into an instructional leader role. That year, the school was faced with a daunting task. The year prior we struggled to get our appropriate accreditation, and our student achievement results were not reflective of what we knew our students were capable of achieving. Under considerable pressure, the staff had one year to get a handle on things or it would have implications for our ability to offer a school program. In order to create focused change and build a strong instructional foundation, I engaged the school community around embracing backwards lesson planning, common and frequent assessments, and building a school culture anchored in personal pride and success.

Identity safe leaders also consider the unique instructional needs of all individuals and groups, including students on the autism spectrum, those with learning and developmental disabilities, as well as students with ADHD. They also institute trauma-informed practices and provide a continuum of services including counseling (see Chapter 6). Seeing beyond labels to find each child's gifts and talents, raise achievement levels, and increase belonging are all necessary and meaningful for treating the whole child. Not a single one of them belongs exclusively to a characterization defined by a label, which promotes a fixed mindset about them. They

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each embody unique perceptions, ideas, and intelligences that set them apart. An identity safe instructional program stems from an understanding of child development; their unique social, emotional, and cognitive needs; as well as their gifts and abilities. Then, we can focus on developing their strengths, addressing their needs, and fostering continuous improvement.

Without a staff's shared and vested commitment to instructional improvement, students will not realize their highest potential. Identity safe leaders train, support, and promote staff to address *listening for student voices*, *teaching for understanding*, *focusing on cooperation*, and *strengthening student autonomy* in their classrooms. Students can then experience identity safety, feel successful in school, and give their best efforts.

Problem-Solving and Consensus-Building

One kindergarten teacher would often remind her students that “problems are our friends,” in the hopes of reframing the many problems and dilemmas that life places before us into opportunities to learn. For educational leaders, even that upbeat statement can ring untrue under the weight of so many great responsibilities. Still, this kindergarten teacher may have an encouraging message even for us, because there are concrete ways to break down complex issues into friendlier—and still realistic—paths for realizing solutions. And it pays to remember that we do not make this journey alone. There are many voices that assist in the decision-making process, and our role often involves garnering the support and leading our teams with an eye on both equity and fair treatment.

Problem-Solving for Identity Safe Schools

University courses will never fully prepare us for every type of problem that will cross our path as educational leaders. Interaction Associates (2019), referenced in Chapter 1, offers simple guidelines for tackling issues and solving problems. Here, we describe specific considerations that impact schoolwide identity safety. These steps can be adapted to addressing problems both small and large:

- **Identify the issue:** What is the problem or concern? What are its root causes, and why is it important to address? How does it relate to identity safety? Where do we stand with it at the moment?
- **Set a goal:** What are you trying to accomplish? How will it impact stakeholders of all backgrounds? How will you know the goal is achieved?
- **Determine a path of action:** Have you involved or received input from all stakeholders in the creation of the plans? Are your plans realistic? Have you mapped intermittent goals to help measure progress?

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Preparation:

- **Participation:** Which stakeholders need to be considered as you determine the path? How will you consult and involve them? How will you include the voices of people who are not often heard? Surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations can help identify who needs to be consulted and how they can participate in making the decision.
- **Data:** What data do you need to gather to better help you understand the problem?
- **Context:** Explore the organizational context: What else is going on in the school that could impact the effort you are making? What unintended consequences may emerge along the way?
- **Stakeholder analysis:** Imagine how the change effort will impact each person (teachers, students, families, etc.). What would make it a win for each of them?

Problem-solving steps—reaching agreement can result from either or both of these perspectives:

- **Vision space:** Reach an agreement on a vision for the future. Imagine what it would be like when the problem is solved.
- **Problem space:** Reach an agreement on the problem. Legitimize the different perspectives, analyze the problem, and agree on some root causes.

Move to identify solutions and a plan for implementing them:

- **Solution space:** Generate possible solutions, evaluate and discuss, and agree on the resolutions.
- **Implementation space:** Agree on an action plan with steps to solve the problem. Plan for how to evaluate implementation.

School leadership places a wide range of problems on our plates along with the responsibility to address them. While most problems are relatively easy to handle, we are, at times, confronted with situations that we never could have imagined. Experiencing a huge crisis can rock a school, but ultimately, we learn as much from our successes as our failures. All situations become opportunities to learn and grow. Our emotional competence will carry our courage as we face adversity, obstacles, crises, and emergencies.

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Targeted by Hate: Two Very Different Approaches for Problem-Solving in a Crisis

A Gay Teacher and a Missed Opportunity to Teach and Heal

Marley worked as an athletic director at a Catholic school in a small town. She describes the night when someone followed her home, waited until she was in bed, and then smashed her car with an ice pick. She recalls the events, stating,

Next, the school was spray-painted with my name and anti-gay slurs, and I received letters that contained threats to kill and eviscerate me. I know now I was attacked for being a lesbian in a Catholic school environment—for being my truest self. But you see, I’ve never looked at life that way. I just did my best to serve the kids, and I believe that I did a good job.

In her role, Marley built many strong relationships with students, but other students openly used anti-gay slurs.

She continues,

The Head of School really cared about me. He was a good man and was horrified by it all. I think he fought to keep me there even when other leaders maybe didn’t want that type of publicity. The police were involved, but never solved the case. I asked for security, but that never happened. Eventually the effect of the trauma drove me to leave my position.

Marley wished that school leaders had spoken openly about the crimes against her rather than cover them up. She lamented that while the newspaper wrote blatantly about the crime that occurred, the school did not inform the students about the events, leaving them to learn about it through the news and rumors. She also felt that the personal relationships she had developed with her students would have caused them to be compassionate toward her. As she says, “When you know someone who is gay and have a good relationship with them, you are more likely to stand up for their rights.”

The school did provide a modicum of professional development on prevention of biased-based and other forms of bullying, but as Marley put it, “In my opinion, it wasn’t helping where the problem was. Clearly, there were issues within the student population.” Marley felt that the awareness of diversity needed to be addressed directly with the students and that teachers needed training to facilitate student dialogue.

(Continued)

(Continued)

A Transgender Student and an Education for a Community

A transgender student was bullied and brutally beaten up on the school field after school. In minutes, a video was sent to a large number of students. Rapidly, the whole school became aware of the incident through social media. The principal took immediate action to support the student and take disciplinary action against the attackers. The following morning, he gathered the entire staff in an emergency meeting before school. Then he addressed the school over the loudspeaker, expressing a strong stand against violence, bullying, and acts of hate toward transgender students, or any student for that matter. He sent a letter to the parent/caregiver community with a similar message. Later in the week, he held a Town Hall meeting to explain what happened and revealed his plans to take action and ensure a similar incident would not happen again. He facilitated a restorative justice process, beginning with the students who were responsible for the bullying. He provided opportunities for them to learn, understand, and repair the harm they caused, and ultimately, change their attitudes and behavior. This process culminated in a healing circle in which these students listened to the student (and two accompanying allies) who had been the target of their bullying, apologized, shared their new understandings of the root causes of their harmful actions, and outlined the steps they would be taking to try to repair harm. These steps had already been informed through adult mediators by the student who had been bullied.

In the next few weeks, the principal began educating the staff. He brought in a guest presenter who gave an overview of gender identity—describing a deeply held sense for some of being male, female, or a different gender independent from their biological sex (Baum & Westheimer, 2015). Then he brought in a panel of staff, students, and family members who shared stories about feeling invisible at times and not valued as their gender selves. In sharing, they created a comfortable and compassionate zone for staff to ask their questions and learn from the experiences of their guests.

The school site council took action to integrate these improvement goals in the school's three-year plan. The principal's efforts even reached the level of the district school board, who developed new policies to ensure that students who are born into one gender, but who identify with another, can use the restroom and locker room that best suits them. They also can choose the pronoun of their preference, dress in a manner that matches their sense of gender identity, and join sports teams that match their self-identified gender.

Consensus-Building for Identity Safe Schools

Equity-focused leaders work to bring the school community together as they navigate through conflicts and dilemmas, making needed adaptations (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2015). When at all possible, they use consensus-building processes when making decisions that affect students. An identity safe campus is the result of a team approach where everyone is contributing to student well-being with the aim of getting all stakeholders on board to make it happen. As part of fostering a solution-oriented culture, identity safe leaders use facilitation skills with the group to create a safe environment for evoking a range of opinions and discussing them in a nonjudgmental manner. Posing dilemmas and encouraging alternate ways to view, analyze, and solve problems fosters engagement and creativity. Through modeling and teaching conflict resolution strategies, leaders facilitate difficult discussions with confidence and care. We approach these exercises as an art and a science, engaging both our intuition and knowledge.

As an art, we seek to read and understand the responses and reactions of the group or person in front of us, focusing on their points of view. When leaders have strong individual relationships with participants, they have already created a culture of listening, connecting, and working through different perspectives respectfully. This means that difficult decisions can find smoother paths to resolution.

The science of consensus-building involves a set of techniques and methodologies. The process includes brainstorming and openly considering and discussing many ideas and differing perspectives. The goal is to come to shared understanding and an agreement on how to move forward. It often requires compromising and discovering decisions that everyone can live with. There are many methods for coming to consensus (e.g., multiple voting or using sticky dots that allow participants to narrow decisions down). The consensus process may take more than one meeting, with multiple discussions and successive adjustments for everyone to arrive at a place where they feel comfortable and can embrace the decision. Questions to ask and remember about this process can include the following:

- Did the process and organization include all stakeholders with an interest in the outcome?
 - Is it driven by a shared and meaningful purpose?
 - Does it follow respectful norms for engagement and conversation?
 - Is everyone engaged and contributing?
 - Are varied data points used to arrive at solutions?

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- Are participants encouraged to challenge assumptions and explore alternatives?
- Were significant efforts made to find creative responses to differences?
- Has consensus been sought only after fully exploring all ideas and interests?

Change Management

Change processes can be messy at times; however, they yield both advantage and opportunity for those primed to recognize it. Margaret Wheatley (n.d.) signals the tremendous potential that we can access during times of great chaos. She highlights scientific discoveries from chaos theory and quantum physics where “chaos is natural . . . and relationships are what matters, even on a subatomic level.” She points out that leaders need to recognize the “intricate webs of cooperation that connect us.” (para 1).

Identity safe leaders begin a change process by checking their own assumptions to clear a path for listening with compassion and understanding. As we have detailed in consensus-building, they empower all members of the school community to participate and contribute. They support their communities to adapt to change with flexible attitudes, and they work in teams to implement a theory of change that results in deep and sustained transformation. In Chapter 7, we offer specific steps for a process to transform your school into an identity safe space.

Timing is an integral aspect for implementing successful change. It’s important to consider the best time to introduce change for the most favorable reception. You may ask if your community isn’t already reeling from other changes. Are you noticing any nuances that may undermine your efforts in spite of the hard work? For example, are teachers arguing amongst themselves? Consider the morale of staff and families—are they amenable to change? Would it make a difference to address a hesitant person or group before proceeding?

Carol Weiss (Theory of Change, n.d.) popularized the concept of a “theory of change,” challenging organizations to articulate and describe their assumptions and processes, outlining the steps needed to actualize long-range goals and outcomes. In Chapter 1, we highlight the importance of weighing the results you are seeking—or the vision—in the context of the change process, and holding it alongside your continually evolving relationships with all stakeholders. Ask staff about their beliefs regarding transformational change while you, and they, seek to meet identity safety goals that will lead to accomplishing your shared vision. Relationships are your key to tapping into their emerging perceptions and can offer direction for guiding people toward producing the conditions needed to reach your goals.

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Often the process of change begins with the low-hanging fruit—in other words, those efforts that are likely to be successful. Creating change in meaningful, yet swift, ways shows everyone what is possible. In shifting the culture of the school, I (Alex) believed that student participation would be essential for the success of this process. While some adults at the school were uncertain about our collective ability to boost student achievement, I was confident that our students could and would rise to the occasion. I knew I could talk to students, and they would listen and respond. Now an administrator, I used my former teacher–student rapport to recruit high social status male students who had the potential to influence their peers about test-taking. I asked them what they knew about standardized tests, showed them our school’s performance, and looked at scores from various schools across the city. Nobody had ever talked with them before about the tests, the scores, and their meaning. Without prompting, the students responded that they not only did not know how important the tests were externally, they knew they could do better because they “did not even try.” We worked collaboratively together to create a short presentation that they could share with the student body.

At our weekly schoolwide Family Meeting, the students shared information about how our school was working to improve and also talked about the power of pride in one’s work. In addition to having opportunities to grow in the classroom, we launched a schoolwide “SWAG” (Students Who Achieve Greatness) initiative. We wanted all students to see how they would be celebrated for their academic growth and highlight ways they had contributed to the school community.

At the same time, I began working with the faculty, but not all teachers were on board. One particular teacher with strong instructional skills was quite vocal, asserting that he did not think standardized tests were of value and worthy of focus. As I had done with the students, I reached out to some of the teachers who were effective with other teachers and students. Reframing the conversation to focus less on standardized tests and more on student learning helped this veteran teacher achieve exceptional results in his classroom. Consistent with the change theory process, we began the steps for backwards mapping, specifying where we wanted the students to be by the end of the semester. From that point, improvements were both marked and rapid.

Louise Waters describes applying a theory of change that she refers to as “disruptive incrementalism.” *Disruptive* points to changes intended to disrupt the status quo in service of the larger equity mission. In order to realize sustained change over time—change that impacts all students—it must impact the organizational structure. *Incremental* refers to attending to the process of implementation—a “go-slow-to-go-fast” philosophy that is designed to maximize the chance of

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success. The steps, whether within one school or an entire district, include the following:

1. **Pain point:** Identify a felt need for which there is high consensus and that aligns with an important structural change to advance equity.
2. **Local Exemplars:** Identify elements of the change that are already in place and highlight these and their champions. Involve these staff members in designing the larger change.
3. **Call to Action:** Explicitly frame the change and urgency in the school's equity goals.
4. **Early Success:** Move ahead with the teachers, departments, or schools most interested and ready. Ensure early success with strong support and problem-solving when issues arise. Use early adopters to develop systems that make it easier for later adopters to succeed. Acknowledge and compensate early adopters for codifying their work.
5. **Ongoing Communication:** Invite and address fears and problems before and during the implementation and continue to share lessons learned and successes system-wide.
6. **Flexibility:** Allow flexibility in the timeline and model within parameters. Be clear about the boundaries and rationale.
7. **Transparency:** Be transparent about any financial implications and invite people to participate in anticipating and creatively addressing potential downsides.

Waters described using disruptive incrementalism as it manifested in real time when she served as superintendent. Her district was planning for a move from five to six periods a day. At first, many teachers expressed reservations about the impact on their teaching and preparation load. However, over the preceding year during her annual one-on-one conversations, Waters listened as staff raised significant concerns about limited electives and the few chances students had to retake failed courses. This was particularly acute in relation to special education students and English learners, both of whom had additional support classes filling slots in their schedules.

Based on her discussions with teachers, Waters framed the shift from five to six periods by sharing the student needs that staff had identified. She highlighted the graduation and college readiness disparities exacerbated by their tight schedule.

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She also shared staff and student concerns that a tight program offering only core courses did not allow students to discover and develop their passions, or dive deeply into culturally relevant classes. Drawing on shared goals and areas of common discomfort or frustration created a safe arena for expression and an openness to the possibility of change. She then invited faculty from the school in the district that was most interested in the six-period day to help her develop and pilot the initial model. Over time, teachers from other schools saw the effectiveness of the change and buy-in increased. Allowing flexibility with the model and a two-year timeline encouraged more to come on board. She also explained how the change supported financial sustainability. A portion of those savings were returned through a salary schedule adjustment.

Waters shares, “While it took two years to move to a six-period day, it was done with little of the rancor common to such endeavors. Moreover, staff emerged energized to design electives and intervention supports that benefited students.”

As leaders navigate the transformation of their schools into vibrant learning organizations, they can help the entire school community seek coherence and stability within the constant disequilibrium of a rapidly changing environment through supportive and compassionate exchanges. A consistent approach in this manner will empower collaborators to continually seek out creative solutions, especially in light of opportunities that also tend to crop up during the change process as they work and learn together. These perks further bond everyone to each other and their shared vision.

By taking the time to examine the theory of change as it is applied specifically to your school and circumstances, you can evaluate the steps that will guide the identity safe school process. By applying disruptive incrementalist steps, you can identify the obstacles to overcome, build on local strengths, and achieve early successes.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF

Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us that diverse and well-prepared teachers are among the most important factors in creating a positive climate that supports the whole child (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Tuned-in leaders address staff needs with the same vigor and attention they afford their students. They realize that teachers are the most powerful conduit for student identity safety. In Chapter 3, we describe ways to introduce teachers to identity safe teaching practices through professional learning. In addition to training and supporting teachers to perform in their classrooms, identity safe leaders work to *diversify*, *retain*, and *supervise* staff in order to anchor those initial efforts.

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Diversifying Staff

As described in Chapter 1, students benefit greatly and have been found to achieve at higher levels when they have educators who look like them, share, and understand their backgrounds. Students and families will always find trust easier to embrace when they see members of their own ethnic or social group working in key positions within the schools. Efforts to increase the representation of Black teachers and administrators—as well as others from diverse backgrounds—will not only greatly support the students and their families but can also deeply influence the whole faculty’s commitment to equity when they experience and understand the perspectives of the diverse voices within the school community. Strategies for diversifying the educator workforce ultimately must reach beyond individual school sites with efforts that include large-scale initiatives with forgivable student loans for potential candidates, as well as providing for service scholarships and residencies that encourage student participation in the application process. However, leaders at the site level do not need to wait for these efforts and can diversify their sites through developing partnerships for student teaching with local universities with diverse teacher candidates. They can support their school’s alumni and encourage paraprofessionals from the community to become credentialed teachers. Extended attention can reap many solutions.

Retention of Staff

Staff retention rates serve as a barometer for measuring teacher satisfaction, indicating the presence of a positive culture and work environment. People choose to stay in jobs where they feel their ideas and contributions make a difference. Site administrators are uniquely positioned to increase a sense of efficacy and team spirit throughout the day by offering a few words, a note, or a passing comment to

Teacher Residency Programs Expand Diversity

Teacher residency programs provide a powerful opportunity to solve the critical need for diversity within schools. Alder Graduate School of Education (<https://aldergse.edu/>), for example, partners with districts and charter management organizations statewide to identify and prepare prospective teachers from local communities to serve in yearlong placements. This innovative model allows for school organizations to attend to pressing challenges like teacher shortages while ensuring that local teachers are supported and prepared with cutting-edge theory and clinical application opportunities.

encourage the personal efforts of staff members. A little effort can go a long way toward developing relationships in and among the school community.

People notice whether you have their back—or not. During hard times when conflicts arise, such as when a teacher is confronted by a hostile parent, the support of a leader can make a huge difference for them. When Jen, a second-grade teacher and a lesbian, became pregnant, she was unsure how to inform her students and families. As her pregnancy progressed, the students started asking about the baby's daddy. She approached the principal, who promised to “have her back,” telling Jen to send anyone with concerns directly to her. The next time the topic came up in class, Jen informed her students that her baby would have two mothers. All parents/caregivers, except for one, were fine. She referred that unhappy parent to the principal, who kept her word and supported Jen by meeting with the parent and supporting Jen, who was grateful that the principal had come through for her.

Identity safe practices that value diversity and support adult identities contribute greatly to a collective feeling of belonging and a shared commitment to the students. As mentioned, expressions of staff appreciation can take many forms during a single day, including a kind word in the hall, a verbal recognition at a meeting, or a mention in a staff bulletin or parent newsletter. Sometimes, a formal teacher recognition event, or media coverage of meaningful school activities, can deliver much-valued appreciation. While identity safe leaders take special care to notice who may be performing well and accomplishing wonderful things, they also make sure not to miss teachers who may be moving about in their quiet universes and are rarely acknowledged. These individuals may even shy from attention, yet they can still enjoy an approach from their school administrator with a word of gratitude. Identity safe leaders are careful not to treat some staff as “favorites,” working to mete out recognition fairly.

Supervision of Staff

School administrators are tasked with the complex process of supervising and evaluating teachers who are new to the field, as well as experienced and veteran teachers. Mentoring, coaching, and other support greatly benefits new teachers during those challenging first years as they discover their sea legs. Identity safe administrators hold high expectations for accountability, supported by their efforts to help all teachers under their supervision meet the specific needs of students. It is their responsibility to provide honest and useful feedback with explicit recommendations in evaluation conferences. Encouraging feedback is effective for teachers in the same way it is effective for students. Teachers enjoy hearing “I believe in you; I hold a high standard for your student-centered teaching and achievement, and I will offer support for you to get there.”

I (Kathe) have experienced many standard evaluations in my tenure as a teacher. I've saved them as encouraging reminders for doing what I love. The best ones were those that specifically listed the behaviors, attitudes, management, and hands-on curriculum techniques that I used with my students. Taking the time to complete an evaluation with thoughtful observations and comments can bind a teacher to the process through positive recognition from the administrator. It creates a vested interest for teachers to continue to give their best efforts.

When teachers are struggling, the site administrators provide concrete suggestions to help them grow. When a teacher has been supported over time, but the efforts do not translate into positive student outcomes, leaders have the daunting task of releasing an untenured teacher, or helping a veteran teacher to face the fact that it might be time to retire. Sometimes coaching a person out of the profession is a blessing for them as well.

With supervision and monitoring, wise feedback, and a team approach in a collaborative and identity safe culture, teachers grow and thrive. In Chapter 3, we share how to develop an adult learning community.

Rising to Challenges/Avoiding Pitfalls

When choosing to be a leader, most of us have signed up for the challenges that leadership brings, motivated by our deeply held values and beliefs. We rise to take on a new role and fill a need. We recognize and take responsibility for our mistakes and failures, gaining the courage to stand tall and persevere. These qualities carry us through some of the pitfalls we face along the way. While challenges sometimes accost us from all sides with constant demands and (sometimes) contradictory district expectations, we use our moral compass, stand firm, discover the best course of action, and lean into our courage.

Neglecting to Consult Others

A common trap involves moving forward without consulting interested or vested stakeholders. For the larger decisions especially, discussing the issues with leadership teams or advisory committees will allow you to discover what they think and feel. They will share good ideas that might not have occurred to you, as well as some innovative solutions to problems. For input from the larger community, the use of surveys and focus groups to hear varying perspectives will invite their investment (see Chapter 7). For smaller decisions, gathering several trusted stakeholders together to gauge their opinions will keep you from the trap of an input-free decision. While most educators will agree with the identity safe teaching principles in theory, changing structures to realize change may still engender resistance. Consulting about even small adjustments will preclude much conflict and can help you choose the best path to achieve the changes.

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Adopting a Growth Mindset and Learning From Mistakes

As a leader, mistakes are inevitable experiences. One of my (Alex) greatest regrets as a new leader was neglecting to attend to the emotional components of change. While many of the staff were my colleagues and I enjoyed their respect, not everyone was invested in the plan I put forth. Making things more challenging, I initially relied on a compliance-oriented strategy to support our efforts (collecting lesson plans and using a rubric to give feedback). Needless to say, this did not work. Midyear after surveying staff, I realized that they were open and invested to look at student data and their plans, but they found time as a barrier. Introducing a professional learning community format shifted the compliance focus to one of learning and collaboration and restored the feeling of trust my colleagues had for me. This effort—common lesson planning—paid dividends in our school’s ability to better support the needs of our students. That year our growth was in the top 0.5% in our entire state. As a leader, I learned the important lesson of creating the conditions for change, collectively developing structures and practices to support professional autonomy, and creating space for reflection so that as a team we could grow together.

A Painful Lesson

Louise Waters shares a painful lesson she learned as principal.

My clerk was upset about an African American family new to nearby subsidized housing. A month in, they had already amassed a number of tardies. Family services was working with them about attendance, and I had personally reached out to the mother to try and build a relationship. The clerk was frustrated that they had not turned in complete immunization records for two of the three children. She explained that after multiple requests, the mother refused to do anything more, saying she didn’t care about the consequences. Reluctantly, I took the School Resource Officer (SRO) as I went to inform the mother that we had to disenroll the students per state law. She was livid. Why the continual harassment? She had given all of the records to the clerk. Why was one child OK and the others not? She showed me the originals. Obviously, the clerk had either misplaced or failed to copy all of the information. Seeing this as a problem family that did not care, she had demanded rather than asked for the paperwork. As tensions escalated both sides got angrier and more entrenched. And I bought into the story. I could have simply called and inquired. I could have visited without the SRO and the presumption of guilt to learn what happened. My prior personal outreach seemed hollow and contrived—just one more White clerk and principal who didn’t care about her family. The relationship I was trying to foster was shattered. A few minutes of listening could have prevented this wild escalation and the months of work to reconnect.

Closing the Gap Between Ideas and Action

An identity safe school is always a work in progress. However, it is important to identify and celebrate growth and progress along the way.

ON THE PERSONAL LEVEL

The path to equity consciousness and emotional intelligence is a continual growth process. It is a given that you will make small and large mistakes along the way, so do not get discouraged. Bouncing back from failure with a growth mindset will help you as you encounter both internal and external obstacles. Here are a few thoughts to help you assess and strengthen your values and actions:

- Continue to study and learn from others to deepen understanding, and have your fingers on the pulse for leading-edge ideas for equity, change, social justice, and education.
- Engage in self-reflection to identify your strengths and blind spots as a leader. Set personal goals to enhance your emotional intelligence.
- Develop listening skills and seek to empower and build strong relationships.
- Identify a mentor/coach or trusted colleague to work with you as a confidant and thought partner.

ON THE SCHOOL-WIDE LEVEL

Here are a few ideas to ensure that you're living up to your vision, mission, and identity safe school goals:

- Work with staff to develop a common language for identity safety and proficiency in equity-focused cultural and systemic change processes.
- Align problem-solving, consensus-building, and change processes to the identity safe principles.
- Diversify staff to mirror the school and provide ongoing supervision and support.

Check Yourself

- To what degree am I aware of my own power and privilege? How can I exercise my power to amplify the voices and increase access for others?
- What are my blindspots? How can I work to become aware of them in the moment?
- Have I spoken up to my supervisors and/or the school board when I see unfair policies or practices that harm students? Why or why not?
- Have I reached out to include the students and adults who are least connected to the school, or have I tried and then given up? How can this be done?
- Does the diversity of the staff mirror the student population? If not, how can I recruit and provide supportive working conditions for more diverse certificated and classified staff members?
- What can I do differently to contribute to the identity safety and academic identities of students in each of these groups: Black and Brown students, LGBTQIA+, English learners, immigrants, special needs, and traumatized students?

Using the Tools

Self-Assessment Template

With an asset-based approach, how do we gauge our strengths and our social and emotional assets? What areas require more attention and effort? Here are a few questions to ask yourself as you reflect on your social and emotional intelligence:

Self-regulation:

1. How do you manage yourself amidst the many pressures of our role?
2. How do you manage your reactions when we are put on the spot or attacked?
3. How do you balance your work life with our personal lives?

Empathy:

1. How do you feel empathy for others? Do you try to imagine how it feels to walk in their shoes?
2. How do you express compassion for others?
3. How do you model acceptance people with a range of gender identities and racial backgrounds?

Internal Motivation:

1. What motivates you?
2. How can you motivate others?

Social Skills:

1. How do you communicate with others? Are you transparent? Do you share information with your constituents in a way that is truthful but does not cause them to feel worried or panicky?
2. How do you express anger or frustration in direct, but calm ways, without blaming or attacking?
3. How do you mediate conflicts between students and adults?
4. Do you have the courage to speak up when you witness staff mistreating students or one another? How?
5. Do you have the courage to speak up to your supervisors and district leaders when you witness unfair policies? How?
6. How do you face crises and emergencies?



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