



**Conversation
Starters**

2010



C O N T E N T S

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Introduction

This resource provides a series of guiding questions and conversational techniques that encourage and support conversations, in the context of leadership development, that are characterized by trust, respect, authenticity, and an openness to learning. Such conversations are known as *courageous conversations* or *open-to-learning conversations*. The Ontario Leadership Framework, through one of its five Core Leadership Capacities, calls for school leaders to engage in courageous conversations to:

- ◆ promote reflection, learning, and planning that are closely geared to the needs and goals of the individual educator and relevant to his or her particular circumstances and context;
- ◆ provide a model and a framework for conversations that foster inquiry, improvement, and growth;
- ◆ focus professional dialogue in the context of mentoring, performance appraisal, and other professional learning processes in ways that best support professional growth.

Making Connections: Engaging in Courageous Conversations

Readers may find it helpful to use this resource in conjunction with *Ideas Into Action: Engaging in Courageous Conversations*,* where the following explanation is provided:

Engaging in courageous conversations is about challenging current practices and fostering improvement and growth through conversation, listening to and acting on feedback, and providing feedback that will lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being. Leaders do this in a variety of ways; for example, they:

- *build relational trust and establish a culture in which courageous conversations and feedback are seen as necessary for improvement;*
- *challenge assumptions at both the individual and the organizational level;*
- *integrate description, analysis, prediction, and a discussion of the next level of work in every debrief about teaching and learning. (p. 4)*

* *Ideas Into Action: Engaging in Courageous Conversations*, Bulletin #2, Winter 2010. Available at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction10.pdf.

Part 1: Guidelines for Using This Resource

1.1 How to Use the Conversation Starters

Part 1 of this resource provides context for the use of the lists of questions – “conversation starters” and questions for “digging deeper” – that are given in Part 2. The questions are designed to assist leaders in conducting courageous conversations related to each of the five Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs).

Below are some guidelines for using the questions in Part 2 effectively – along with a few cautions.

Effective Practices

- ❑ Use the questions as a resource to support instructional leadership in collaborative efforts such as developing Mentee Learning Plans for newly appointed school leaders or developing Annual Growth Plans as part of the principal/vice-principal performance appraisal process.
- ❑ Adapt questions as appropriate to reflect the particular needs and circumstances of the individual, or use them as models for formulating new questions that more closely address the person’s needs and circumstances.
- ❑ Focus the dialogue on the possible learning pathways that would assist the individual in achieving his or her particular goals, and on the person’s readiness to explore new skill areas.
- ❑ Listen actively to gain an understanding of both technical problems and adaptive challenges in the individual’s situation. Take both aspects into account when determining the optimal approach to take in the conversation and the most appropriate questions to use.
- ❑ Focus on the areas that are most relevant to the learning needs of the individual, selecting the questions that are best suited to the purpose.
- ❑ Encourage the individual not only to learn new skills but also to adopt new attitudes.
- ❑ Focus on ways to promote job-embedded learning.
- ❑ Select only a few manageable areas of focus for any given conversation.

Cautions

- ❑ Do not use the questions in this resource guide in a formulaic way, as though following a checklist.
- ❑ Avoid using the questions as part of an evaluative tool.
- ❑ Do not try to cover all of the questions provided in this resource; they are designed to serve as a menu from which questions appropriate to a particular conversation may be selected.
- ❑ Avoid duplicating the exact wording of the questions; instead, express the ideas in ways appropriate to the particular context.
- ❑ Do not try to work through the questions in the order in which they appear.

1.2 Using the Conversation Starters in the Context of the Five Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs)

The Ontario Leadership Framework, sponsored by the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL), provides a detailed description of the practices and competencies related to the five Core Leadership Capacities. It should be used as a resource in developing Mentee Learning Plans and PPA Annual Growth Plans (see www.ontario.ca/eduleadership). The five CLCs, with examples of related goals, are outlined below.

1. Setting Goals

Ensure that goals are strategic, specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound and that they promote improvement in teaching and learning.

For example:

- Develop and communicate a shared vision for the school that provides a context for goal setting.
- Lead groups in using evidence and inquiry to establish goals, monitor progress, and make adjustments in plans and/or practices.
- Establish key linkages among individual goals, school improvement plan goals, and board and ministry priorities.

2. Aligning Resources with Priorities

Ensure that financial, capital, and human resources, curriculum and teaching resources, professional learning resources, and program allocations are tied to provincial education priorities, with student achievement and well-being providing the unambiguous central focus.

For example:

- Engage teachers, staff, the school board, and the broader community in decision-making processes related to resource allocation and in sharing ownership of the results.
- Collaborate with other schools and/or districts to learn about effective practices and to share resources whenever possible.

3. Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures

Enable and encourage schools, school communities, and districts to work together and learn from one another, always with the central focus of improving teaching quality and student achievement and well-being.

For example:

- Facilitate shared understanding of effective practices to improve student achievement and well-being as a central focus for collaboration among staff, federations, associations, the school board, and the diverse school community.
- Improve and build on existing models of professional learning communities.
- Enable teamwork and collective decision making among teachers and staff, providing opportunities for teacher leadership.
- Engage parents and the broader school community to become part of the learning culture.

4. Using Data

Lead and engage school teams in gathering and analysing provincial, district, school, and classroom data to identify trends, strengths, and needs that will inform specific actions for improvement focused on teaching and learning.

For example:

- Use data to inform school improvement planning.
- Support staff in developing skills and building confidence in relation to the technical aspects of data collection and analysis.
- Address adaptive challenges, such as gaining support among staff members for the use of data to inform approaches that will help to improve student achievement.
- Use data to help foster a school culture in which staff members:
 - have high expectations for student achievement;
 - assess student performance and modify practice based on findings;
 - take ownership for the results.

5. Engaging in Courageous Conversations

Challenge current practices and foster innovation through conversation, listening to and acting on feedback, and providing feedback that will lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being.

For example:

- Build trust within relationships and establish a culture in which courageous conversations and feedback are seen as necessary for improvement.
- Challenge assumptions at both the individual and the organizational level.
- Integrate description, analysis, prediction, and a discussion of the next level of work in all professional work sessions and conversations with staff about teaching and learning.

Part 2: Conversation Starters for the Five CLCs

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The following conversation starters, as well as the questions provided for “digging deeper”, are examples only. In actual conversations, the mentor/coach/appraiser should, after actively listening to the individual, tailor his or her questions and approach to that person’s particular concerns, needs, interests, and context. The technical problems and/or adaptive challenges that the individual identifies will help the mentor/coach/appraiser determine the most appropriate ways to structure and conduct the conversation, and select, adapt, or devise the most appropriate questions to use.

2.1 Setting Goals

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What are some of the factors you consider when determining goals? ❑ What model are you using when setting goals (e.g., SMART goals)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ In what ways might you modify your goals and actions to align them more closely with school and board priorities? ❑ If you were to revisit your goals a year from now, how easy would it be to measure their impact? ❑ As you examine your goals, are there any refinements, in terms of specificity, measurability, accountability, relevance, and timing, that would make them clearer and easier to implement? ❑ In what ways do your goals reflect evidence-based practice? ❑ Which of the goals is your top priority? Why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ As you reflect on the practices that you use to lead the school improvement process, consider the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What are some of the ways in which teachers are involved in shared decision making about school improvement initiatives? – What indicators would show that the school improvement planning process is a success? ❑ As you reflect on the current school improvement planning process, to what degree is it producing the desired results? ❑ What methods are you planning to use to keep staff committed, engaged, and motivated with respect to implementing school improvement goals (e.g., celebrate milestones, keep the vision focused and manageable, revisit the school improvement plan throughout the year)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What are some of the strategies you use to help build consensus around school priorities? ❑ Are staff members engaged in professional learning communities (PLCs)? In their collaborative work, what steps and processes do they use to achieve school or system goals? How can you provide support to encourage further collaboration? ❑ In what ways do the classroom practices you have observed reflect the school improvement goals? ❑ To what degree do teachers’ Annual Learning Plans support school goals? What are some ways in which you can support teachers’ Annual Learning Plan goals that will also support the school improvement goals? ❑ How do you plan to acknowledge and celebrate the achievement of goals?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Which board goals do you consider to be most relevant to your school needs? Why? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ In what ways do your school goals reflect the board’s goals?

2.2

Aligning Resources with Priorities

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What do you do to ensure that resources and money are allocated in an equitable way to help improve teachers' instructional skills at your school? <input type="checkbox"/> What impact does allocating resources to the improvement of teachers' skills have on the quality of daily instruction in your school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have you identified the skill areas might you want to focus on in order to help teachers meet school improvement goals? <input type="checkbox"/> How can resources best be used to support teachers in developing these skills? Are resources being allocated to professional development opportunities that will be available to all teachers? Describe how you have supported your staff in applying these resources in the context of job-embedded learning. <input type="checkbox"/> How will you know that this support is making a difference in the quality of daily instruction? What indicators will you use to measure changes in the quality of instruction? <input type="checkbox"/> Can you think of additional ways in which staff assignments and allocation of resources can be optimized, now and over time, to help improve student learning?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What types of resources can be accessed to support the school improvement plan? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What comes to mind as you take a mental inventory in the internal resources available to support your school goals (e.g., teachers willing to mentor new teachers, student success teachers)? In what ways could these internal resources be used more effectively? <input type="checkbox"/> As you consider the external resources available to the school (e.g., literacy coach, resource teachers), how could they be used more effectively to support the priorities in the school plan? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you reviewed your budget to detect any areas of duplication of effort or unnecessary expenditures? Are there any expenditures or resource allocations that seem unconnected to your school or board improvement plan? <input type="checkbox"/> What can you do to ensure that your approach to allocating funds is focused, strategic, and aligned with top school priorities?

2.3

Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What indicators would show evidence that a collaborative learning culture is flourishing in your school? ❑ How would staff and/or students benefit from this collaborative learning culture? What benefits would be realized in daily teaching practice? ❑ Over time, what indicators would show evidence that the collaborative learning culture is having a positive impact on your school? ❑ How are the principles of equity and inclusive education embedded into school practices and the school improvement plan? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How will you provide opportunities for you and staff to engage in joint decision making and planning? ❑ What strategies can you use to determine if there is continuous improvement in teaching practice (e.g., classroom walk-throughs, observation of teacher moderation and/or of focused discussion in PLCs)? ❑ With respect to promoting a collaborative learning culture at your school, what areas have you identified that require further attention? ❑ What effective practices can you use to support a safe environment that allows staff to collaborate and share input and ideas openly and respectfully and that fosters professional development? ❑ How can you ensure that staff have the time to meet on a regular basis for collaborative planning (e.g., through flexible timetabling)? ❑ How do you communicate with your staff about school/system priorities (e.g., through regular staff meetings, informal conversations)? ❑ How would you gauge the level of trust among staff, and between staff and administrator(s), staff and community, and staff and students? How can trust levels be enhanced? ❑ How do you reach and engage parents, diverse groups within the school community, and other stakeholders? How can you enhance these efforts? ❑ What practices are in place to help ensure that staff learning occurs in a safe and respectful environment (e.g., one that encourages risk taking and new ideas and has a high tolerance for mistakes as part of the learning process)? ❑ How will you facilitate training and discussions with staff on equity and inclusive education? ❑ How do you use technology to enhance collaboration (e.g., videoconferencing, wikis, online document-sharing services)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What <i>external</i> expertise has your school accessed to support staff learning? ❑ What <i>internal</i> staff expertise has your school accessed to support staff learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What approaches do you and your staff take to problem solving and/or responding to challenges? ❑ What types of professional learning opportunities are available to you and your staff? How are these opportunities made available? Are there more effective ways to provide these opportunities? ❑ Do you find that staff members are self-motivated in their professional learning? What strategies might you use to encourage and promote greater interest in professional learning? ❑ How have staff members responded to learning opportunities provided using external expertise? To those provided using internal staff expertise?

2.4 Using Data

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What sources of data are available to you on the progress of overall student achievement at your school? ❑ What sources of data are available to you on the progress of individual students and the success of individual school programs? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What sources of data do you use to monitor student learning and achievement (e.g., formative assessments, reports on standardized tests and grades)? ❑ What sources of data do you use to monitor school improvement (e.g., standardized test results, recorded classroom observations, samples of student work, report cards, attendance data, behavioural data, the board improvement plan for student achievement)? ❑ What might you infer or conclude from this data (e.g., with respect to trends, patterns, areas of concern)? How could these findings be applied in schools and classrooms to improve student outcomes? ❑ How would you account for any gap between the results you had expected to see and the results you are seeing? What is your understanding of the root causes of these gaps? What practices or processes have been put in place on the basis of your understanding of these gaps? ❑ Which sources of quantitative and qualitative data are you finding most useful when analysing your school results (e.g., student surveys, samples of student work, EQAO results, parent feedback, teachers' Annual Learning Plans)? Why? ❑ How have you and your staff applied the conclusions reached from an analysis of relevant data to design or modify the school improvement plan? To improve student outcomes? ❑ In what ways do you support your staff in understanding school data (e.g., evidence-based resources, research articles)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ In what ways does your school systematically and regularly monitor <i>individual</i> student achievement and well-being? ❑ In what ways does your school systematically and regularly monitor <i>overall</i> student achievement and well-being? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How would you describe your school community's understanding of "student well-being"? ❑ In what ways does your staff use data on individual student achievement and well-being to assess and modify classroom instructional strategies? How do you monitor success of these strategies? ❑ In what ways does data on school-wide student achievement and well-being affect classroom instructional strategies? ❑ What are some of your strategies or practices that are contributing to results with respect to overall and individual student achievement and well-being? ❑ What strategies are in place to ensure that student well-being is a priority? What changes could be made to current practices in order to enhance student well-being?

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What methods of assessment and evaluation are most commonly being used by the teachers at your school? ❑ How is the effectiveness of these methods being monitored? ❑ In what contexts and in what ways is descriptive feedback being used to help improve student learning? ❑ Are the assessment and evaluation tools free from bias? Do they reflect the diversity or demographics of the region/school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How and to what degree are assessment and evaluation practices used to inform learning opportunities in the classroom? How effective have commonly used methods been in helping teachers decide on next steps for student learning and appropriate instructional approaches? How do you know? ❑ What conversations are you having or encouraging others to have (e.g., peer-to-peer conversations) to support the gathering, analysis, and use of data to support student achievement and well-being? ❑ What practices are used to ensure that the feedback received by students about their learning is specific and timely? How do you know that these practices are effective? ❑ What practices are used to ensure that the feedback parents receive about their child's learning is specific and timely? Do you think this feedback is helping to strengthen confidence in public education? How do you know?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Based on your assessment of teachers' current engagement in professional development, what gaps do you see that may require further in-service training on understanding and using data? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What additional knowledge and skills do teachers need to enhance their understanding of assessment data? How would teachers apply these skills to improve student outcomes? How would you measure their success? What is your plan to support teachers in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills?

2.5

Engaging in Courageous Conversations

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Trust and respect are essential to the effective communication of constructive feedback. How do you promote trusting and respectful relationships with your staff? ❑ Before providing constructive feedback, have you questioned your own assumptions and considered other perspectives on, or interpretations of, the situation you are discussing with the individual? ❑ If you were the individual receiving the constructive feedback, how would you like the conversation to be handled? ❑ What are some ways in which this individual could be encouraged to engage more fully in the conversation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How would you ensure that the relationship of trust and respect is not negatively affected by a conversation in which you have to impart constructive feedback? ❑ In planning your approach, how would you ensure that the relationship remains positive? Have you considered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – whether you have all the information you need in order to be thoroughly prepared for this conversation? – which individuals or groups you may need to consult before engaging in the conversation? – what your specific goals are for the meeting? – what values are reflected in your own position? – whether you are able to share your goals? – how you will invite the other person to share his or her goals and/or values and assumptions? – what goals you may have in common? ❑ What is the best outcome you can envision for this conversation? What could you do to promote this outcome? ❑ What strategies or practices could you use to avoid a negative outcome? ❑ Do you have any “non-negotiables” in mind? In what areas is there room for change or flexibility? How could you frame the conversation so that a “win/win” outcome might be achieved? ❑ What additional steps would you need to take to prepare for a conversation dealing with a particularly pressing or difficult issue? ❑ What is your greatest concern about the conversation?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Which aspects of the conversation do you look forward to? Which make you uncomfortable? ❑ What factors are contributing to this level of comfort or discomfort? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What aspects of this conversation make you feel particularly tense? ❑ What opportunities does this situation offer you? ❑ As you reflect on similar situations you have handled well in the past, are there any strategies or practices that you used that might be helpful in the present situation?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How will you make the other person feel respected and welcome and set a positive tone? ❑ What are some ways in which you help others feel safe and open to dialogue? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What might be some of the other person’s concerns and/or issues? ❑ What are some ways in which you can promote shared understanding and involvement? ❑ In the present situation, would a coaching mode (e.g., encouraging the person to reflect on his or her own practice) support your goals?

Conversation Starters	Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What strategies do you consider most effective in helping to ensure that learning-focused conversations build a sense of efficacy among staff? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How can you approach a performance appraisal conversation in a way that encourages and supports the individual to learn new skills and does not provoke a defensive reaction? ❑ What accomplishments and improvements that support the school goals and priorities can be highlighted in this meeting? ❑ As you reflect on your past handling of difficult conversations, which approach do you notice that you prefer – an avoidance approach, a confrontational approach, or a cooperative approach using dialogue and promoting shared meaning? Which approach do you think is most effective? What skills would you like to develop so you can use this approach more comfortably and effectively? How could you develop those skills?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ As you reflect on conversations you have had with teachers at your school about their Annual Learning Plans, what issues or needs are surfacing that may require more support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What practices do you have in place to support the Annual Learning Plan process for teachers? ❑ What practices might you introduce to improve support for the development of the teacher's Annual Learning Plan?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ As you reflect on times when you have received feedback, what was effective/not effective? Why? ❑ As you reflect on times when you have given others feedback, what was effective/not effective? Why? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ How might you determine if an individual is receptive and wants feedback? ❑ Are the real issues being openly discussed, or do you feel there may be a hidden agenda? If so, what are some ways in which you could approach the conversation in order to address the real issues? ❑ In what ways can you indicate responsibility for your own role in problems/issues? How can this ownership contribute to an open, honest conversation? ❑ Who will make decisions during this meeting/conversation? How will they be made? What sort of follow-up will take place?



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