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Leading with Purpose: Co-Constructing Leadership Identity
through Role Clarity and Collaboration



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Leading with Purpose: Co-Constructing Leadership Identity through Role Clarity and Collaboration

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Abstract

Purpose: The Purpose of this study is to investigate how purpose-driven leadership and clearly defined responsibilities could improve leaders' performance, collaboration, and team morale. It specifically looks at how co-creating a common "Why" statement and mapping responsibilities into a three-tiered framework (core, extended, and professional) minimises job ambiguity, empowers teams, and aligns leadership practices with organisational goals.

Methodology: The study used a qualitative case study design and a sixty-minute professional learning session with Subject Leaders from an international secondary school. The workshop used Role Theory (Biddle, 1979), Role Leadership Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966), and Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) to incorporate structured reflection, collaborative discourse, and consensus building.

Findings: Co-creating a "Why" statement improved clarity, morale, and psychological safety. By mapping roles into the Tiered Framework, leaders were able to remove ambiguity, empower teams, and promote institutional alignment. Although the session was designed for Subject Leaders at one international school, the method may be used to a variety of contexts, including healthcare, business, and non-profit sectors, where role clarity and common purpose are critical.

Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The study combines Role Theory, Role Leadership Theory, and Servant Leadership with Simon Sinek's (2011) concept of "Start with Why," to provide a practical paradigm that connects role clarity with purpose-driven leadership. By incorporating these frameworks into the Tiered Responsibility model, it demonstrates how structured reflection and collective meaning-making may support leadership growth in complex organisations.

Key Words: *Purpose-driven leadership, Tiered Responsibility Framework, Team morale, Shared vision, Sustainable learning.*

1. Introduction: Why Purpose Matters In Educational Leadership

In today's rapidly changing educational environment, leaders face increased demands, increased workloads, and constant organisational transformation. Leaders are expected to be more than just instructional supervisors; they must also serve as strategic planners, community liaisons, innovators, and emotional support systems for both staff and students (Day et al., 2019). The ongoing waves of educational reform, as well as the desire for adaptive leadership styles, have left school leaders feeling overwhelmed and unsure about their roles (Klar & Brewer, 2013). These pressures, when not supported by a strong sense of purpose, frequently contribute to decision fatigue, burnout, and disengagement (Maslach, 2011).

Too often, leadership is reduced to a list of job-specific obligations, with no clear sense of purpose or established boundaries. As duties mount, ambiguity can harm leaders' performance and well-being. Understanding the "why" behind leadership responsibilities becomes a crucial anchor—not only for decision-making, but also for morale, teamwork, and strategic direction in difficult times.

Start with 'Why', a concept developed by Simon Sinek in 2009 (Sinek, 2011), reminds us that high-performing teams are defined by why they do what they do. In education, this is aligning leadership behaviours with common beliefs, values, and objectives. A strong "why" promotes resilience, psychological safety, and collective agency (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), all of which are necessary for long-term leadership in an increasingly complicated educational environment.

This article contends that leadership is more than just performing individual responsibilities; it is about developing a shared, collaborative identity with a deeper "why." These obligations are fulfilled not because one person is required to do so, but because a team chooses to work together, motivated by a single goal.

2. Theoretical Foundation-Literature Review

Role Theory, created in the mid-twentieth century, investigates how people behave in response to the expectations associated with their social or organisational roles (Biddle, 1979). Role Theory evolved from sociology and social psychology in the 1940s and 1970s, drawing on the work of scholars such as Biddle (1979) and Levinson et al. (1965). It was created in response to a rising interest in how organisations allocate roles and how conflict influences behavior and mental health. In education and other institutions, leaders sometimes inherit predetermined tasks. Without a clear objective, these obligations can become fragmented and challenging. This is where the "why" notion, as emphasised by Sinek (2011), comes into play, providing a psychological anchor and motivational compass for meaningfully interpreting and carrying out those duties.

Role Leadership Theory expands on this by examining how leaders understand, express, and negotiate role expectations to match with team goals and organisational vision (Katz & Kahn, 1966). It understands that leadership is more than just doing things; it is also about navigating ambiguity, generating alignment, and providing psychological safety. Role Leadership Theory

was influenced by systems theory and organisational psychology, particularly by Katz and Kahn (1966), who investigated how leaders perform within complex social systems. Their research shown that effective leadership entails clarifying responsibilities, controlling expectations, and decreasing uncertainty, particularly in hierarchical institutions such as schools or enterprises.

2.1 Tiered Responsibility Framework: A Tool for Sustainable Leadership

Many educational institutions have informal leadership obligations that extend beyond the prescribed job description and lack a defined method of distribution or review. The accumulation of activities beyond clearly defined positions, also known as role overload and ambiguity, contributes to leader fatigue, unclear expectations, and uneven workloads (Levinson et al., 1965; Maslach, 2011).

To address this, the Tiered Responsibility Framework was introduced as a reflective and strategic tool that divides leadership tasks into three interconnected levels, based on organisational role clarity, job design theory, and sustainable leadership practices (Biddle, 1979; Day et al., 2011; Spillane, 2005).

Core responsibilities are key tasks that are directly related to institutional goals and formal job descriptions, such as curriculum planning, assessment alignment, and team meeting leadership (Biddle 1979). Extended responsibilities are roles that increase leadership impact but are frequently context-specific, discretionary, and better suited to rotation or collaboration, such as organising school events, driving instructional innovation, or mentoring new staff (Spillane, 2005). Professional Guidelines are not action items, but rather the conditions necessary for leadership sustainability, such as role clarity, acknowledgement, and protected time. They represent structural supports described as critical for preventing burnout and increasing engagement (Day et al., 2011; Maslach, 2011).

This circular model demonstrates how each component complements the others, resulting in a balanced, sustainable leadership ecosystem.

Figure 1: Framework: Tiered Responsibilities Model

Source: Researcher's work

**Table 1: Tiered Responsibilities Model Framework**

Framework: Tiered Responsibilities Model		
Core Responsibilities	Extended Responsibilities	Professional Guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum alignment (MYP & DP) Internal assessment moderation Team meetings and agenda setting Co-planning and sharing best practices Data-informed student support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing department events or fairs Leading professional development Representing the subject in school-wide initiatives Mentoring new teachers Coordinating interdisciplinary units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protected time for planning and reflection Formal recognition and performance review inclusion Transparent responsibility distribution CPD access and coaching opportunities Wellbeing support for leaders

Core Responsibilities (Non-negotiable, in line with official JD): These include tasks critical to the role such as curriculum alignment (MYP & DP), internal assessment moderation, organising and chairing team meetings, facilitating co-planning sessions and using data to support student learning (Spillane, 2005).

Extended Responsibilities (Valuable but rotatable or compensated): These include leadership tasks that improve school culture but may differ depending on the context. Examples include organising department events or subject fairs, facilitating professional development sessions, representing the subject in school-wide initiatives, mentoring new teachers, and coordinating multidisciplinary units (Greenleaf et al., 2002).

Professional Guidelines (Conditions for Effective Leadership): These are contextual facilitators that assure the sustainability and support of the leadership function, rather than tasks. Examples include dedicated time for planning and contemplation, formal recognition of leadership work

in performance assessments, a clear distribution of tasks, access to professional growth, and emotional or peer support for leadership well-being (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Maslach, 2011).

The framework promotes psychological safety and clearer boundaries for leaders by distinguishing between what is important, negotiable, and supportive of well-being (Fullan, 2018; Spillane, 2005). It also promotes an inclusive discourse about shared leadership by highlighting areas where team members feel confident, overburdened, or underappreciated, transforming reflection into a useful equity tool.

Importantly, combining the Tiered Framework with a collectively produced "Why" statement allows teams to connect actions with values, minimising ambiguity and fostering a more resilient leadership culture (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Sinek, 2011). Co-creating this purpose guarantees that leadership is more than just task execution; it is about making a meaningful contribution to collective school improvement.

This organised method can be applied to a variety of leadership contexts, including education, healthcare, charity organisations, and corporate teams, where role clarity and shared purpose are critical for sustained success.

3. Findings from Case Study: A Workshop on Subject Leader Purpose and Responsibilities

A sixty-minute leadership workshop titled "Leadership Responsibility: Leading with Why" was used to conduct a case study to investigate how educational leadership may be grounded in shared purpose and sustainable role design. Participants included Subject Leaders from an international secondary school who serve as middle leaders in their departments. The workshop was both a professional learning experience and a data collection opportunity to better understand how purpose and clarity influenced leadership engagement and agency. This workshop was a qualitative case study that combined Greenleaf's Servant Leadership principles from 1977 (Greenleaf et al., 2002), role theory (Biddle, 1979), and purpose-driven frameworks (Sinek, 2009).

3.1 Workshop Objectives:

- Use Simon Sinek's (2011) Golden Circle model to define the "Why" of the subject leadership role.
- Identify and categorise existing leadership responsibilities into three tiers. Core, Extension, and Professional Guidelines
- Encourage team introspection, co-construction, and common language for sustainable leadership practices.
- Develop a collective "Why" statement based on authentic leadership principles and institutional goals.

3.2 Methodology and Workshop Design:

The workshop was informed by Servant Leadership theory (Greenleaf et al., 2002), Role Theory (Biddle, 1979). It also integrated collaborative norms such as pausing, paraphrasing, and presuming positive intent (Senge, 1994).

The session included individual reflection where participants studied job descriptions and answered introspective prompts such "What feels most meaningful in this role?" and asked: "What would be missing if this leadership team didn't exist?" Participants used Padlet to create interactive maps categorising leadership activities. The consensus-building process involved participants working in small groups to create purpose ("Why") statements using pre-set templates. These were then presented, discussed, and combined into a single version that reflected shared leadership identity and values.

3.3 Group Statements Developed:

"As a subject leader, we exist to foster a collaborative and supportive team culture, ensuring curriculum coherence, clear communication and shared leadership—so that teachers are empowered and students thrive."

"As subject leaders, our purpose is to support and collaborate with subject teachers, ensuring a coherent and inclusive curriculum that fosters students' well-being."

"As subject leaders, our purpose is to support teachers' growth through collaboration to ensure students' full potential (accessing curriculum to foster lifelong learning to positively impact society)."

Final Consolidated Statement: "As Subject Leaders, our purpose is to foster a collaborative and supportive team culture that empowers teacher growth and ensures a coherent, inclusive curriculum—so that all students can thrive, reach their full potential, and become lifelong learners who contribute positively to society."

4. Psychological Impact and Leadership Sustainability

The session demonstrated that co-creating a common mission statement increased team morale, defined expectations, and eliminated uncertainty. According to Levinson et al. (1965), role ambiguity is a predictor of leadership stress. According to Fullan (2014), a shared vision leads to increased commitment during institutional transformation. Empowered leaders experience increased resilience and job satisfaction (Procaccini, 2012). Leaders were also able to express preferences, flag overload, and advocate for support without judgement after mapping their responsibilities into a tiered framework.

Broader Implications for Educational Leadership

Although the case study focused on Subject Leaders, the workshop structure and theoretical foundations apply to a wide range of educational leadership roles. Department Heads might use the model to refine coordinator tasks. School Leadership Teams can use the process to develop their collective vision and assign tasks. Professional Development Coordinators can organise comparable sessions for mentoring and leadership development. The tiered approach

also allows educational systems to create leadership pathways that prevent burnout and promote equity.

5. Limitation and Contextual Consideration

While the results of this workshop were positive, limitations must be recognized to contextualize its implications. The session was held in a single international school setting with a distinct leadership culture, which may limit generalisability. While no quantitative pre/post metrics were collected to assess long-term impact, including such measures in future implementations could improve the empirical validity of the findings and provide more insight into the long-term effectiveness of purpose-driven leadership development (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Despite these limitations, the collaborative process improved team cohesion and revealed actionable themes, and it represents a promising model for institutions looking to co-create clarity and purpose in leadership teams.

6. Conclusion: Purpose as a Leadership Compass

Purposeful leadership is more than a motivational slogan; it is a foundation for clarity, collaboration, and continuity in a complex educational environment. When educational leaders have a defined "why" and a shared structure of responsibilities, they are better able to serve, support, and lead. This session demonstrates how theory, reflection, and collaborative design can result in practical instruments for leadership sustainability. Starting with purpose allows educational institutions to produce not only stronger leaders, but also stronger communities.

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