



SAFE

# PASSAGES

JOURNAL PROCESS INSPIRES COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE IN EMERGING LEADERS

---

By Karen Glinert Carlson, Kathleen Ann Harsy, and Susan M. Karas

**B**eginning school leaders' lives are stress-filled and lack support. When asked how they are doing, novice leaders often say they are fine, even when they aren't.

A candidate in the principal leadership program at Dominican University, who rarely spoke up during formal meetings, is a prime example. While it appeared on the surface that everything was going well, a journal entry she submitted as part of the program told a different story.

"When I left class on Monday, I was still extremely frustrated," she wrote. "It seemed most people had already had their paperwork completed and their projects mapped out. I really hate feeling behind. It's one thing when you are behind because you are procrastinating, but when it is something beyond your control? Well, it is not a good feeling. ... I am about five minutes from jumping off the nearest bridge (I think 71st and Pulaski is the closest)."

Clearly, this candidate needed immediate support.

A question posed by school leaders and professional developers alike is: How do we move novice educators from the initiation stage to proficiency?

As we worked to improve the principal leadership program at Dominican University, our questions dug deeper: Are there strategies that we can use to facilitate and accelerate the transition? Can these strategies be employed for aspiring and novice principals? Will the same strategies that help aspiring and novice leaders help other aspiring or novice educators in various roles? Can we develop a process

to intervene early for those at risk and get them back on track before they fail?

We chose the Reflective Dialogue Journal as a systematic strategy to help aspiring leaders between formal meetings. After two years of implementation with 60 principal interns from public, charter, and private/parochial schools, we have more than 1,500 journal entries, enough evidence to show that Reflective Dialogue Journal has potential to advance novice leaders and may also help other novice educators in a variety of roles.

#### WHAT IS A REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE JOURNAL?

The Reflective Dialogue Journal is a private, written, informal exchange between the candidate and university internship supervisor that includes a reflection of the week's activities and the aspiring leader's questions, concerns, major learnings, and ahas. This exchange continues over the course of a year.

The internship supervisor responds with probing questions to help the participant think about the experience and ways to solve leadership problems. The Reflective Dialogue Journal allows early intervention through frequent and immediate feedback.

We implemented the Reflective Dialogue Journal to support the growth of aspiring school leaders during their pivotal internship year. Integrating self-analysis and reflection supports the learning process of aspiring leaders. The Reflective Dialogue Journal provides university internship supervisors and district mentors a platform to better coach

their protégés, help them frame their experiences, build their repertoire, and clarify their theories in action.

The internship supervisor serves as a thought partner to the novice and responds to the journal via email, raising questions and offering suggestions. The goal is to support each candidate to become a reflective practitioner who can reflect in action (Schön, 1987) and a reflective leader who can frame and reframe as needed (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Note: The Reflective Dialogue Journal is not a diary, an internship log, or a place to vent. Although expressing personal matters and documenting internship hours are important, the Reflective Dialogue Journal is not the place.

### OUTCOMES

A significant outcome of the Reflective Dialogue Journal process was stress management. Becoming a school leader is an engaging, consuming task in which people find themselves under large amounts of seemingly unmanageable stress. The Reflective Dialogue Journal creates a support system for novice leaders.

After analyzing candidates' journal entries, we noted a clear necessity for stress management. How can we help support emerging leaders with stress management throughout the internship and in their first years as a leader? To do this, the internship supervisor must establish a trusting relationship before and throughout the journals.

Candidates' experiences with the Reflective Dialogue Journal were more beneficial when they first developed a strong relationship with their internship supervisor. With this meaningful relationship in place, participants felt more of a connection and were able to share reflections that would turn into learning experiences.

Another lesson learned was the internship director's ability to alter monthly seminar discussions because of increased insight into the challenges and successes of each of the interns. Through the Reflective Dialogue Journal process, candidates are encouraged to reflect, refocus, and reframe their thinking about a situation in the early stages of their internship, rather than when panic has set in.

To strengthen the Reflective Dialogue Journal process, surveyed candidates suggested that journal entries be used to show exemplars, provide a format, model the experience, and teach emerging leaders to use the journals more effectively.

### WHY IT WORKS

The Reflective Dialogue Journal works because it is a systematic use of technology to support a mentoring relationship that fosters reflection and professional growth. Through observation, surveys, and discussions with our candidates, we learned that the following conditions are critical to the success of the Reflective Dialogue Journal process:

- **Relationship trust:** This trust is built through confidential-

ity, playing a supportive role, not serving as an evaluator, relationship building, consistency of interaction, and availability of mentor to the candidate.

- **Credibility:** Credibility is established through experience, knowledge of the field, valuable commentary, responsiveness to candidate's needs, and solid professional judgment.
- **Skilled coaching support:** Support includes good listening skills, ability to identify key issues and concerns, knowledge of change, transition leadership, and adult development, excellent coaching skills, and knowing when to intervene.

The skill of the internship supervisor to build a strong relationship built on trust, credibility, and skilled coaching is critical.

### MOVING FROM INITIATION TO COMPETENCE

The transition to leadership competence includes five stages: initiation, emerging, developing, proficient, and competent. Here are characteristics of these stages and Reflective Dialogue Journal entries that reflect each stage.

#### Initiation

In this phase, the candidate is unsure of his or her role and about leaving the classroom, exhibits insecurity and excitement in the new position, feels overwhelmed, and has difficulty handling the multitude of things to do.

Journal entry: "It is new staff week at my school, and watching the new teachers take a tour of our building today brings me back to anytime I am new in any situation — those feelings of anxiety, excitement, nervousness stay constant anytime I am new to a position. It was oddly reassuring to me to see the new staff walk by my room and for me to put myself in their places and know that there are always nerves at the beginning of any new adventure, endeavor, or challenge, and that this master's program is no different in that sense."

#### Emerging

A candidate at this stage has a better understanding of the principal's role and is not as grounded to the classroom. In addition, the candidate has developed the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives.

Journal entry: "I loved *Pathways to School Leadership* by Bolman and Deal; I found their style easy to read, and the comparisons spot on, including being very strategic about the political factors in a school and who to empower and when to empower them. ... I also think the way the authors depicted the energy and excitement a new person brings to a leadership position (new teacher, new principal) was extremely helpful to read; prior to reading this book, I might have approached a situation in a similar manner to Mr. Rodriguez — excited, charged up, determined — without thinking of the way that energy or excitement might be perceived by teachers who have worked in education for many years (perhaps even those older than me)

or by those who already have personal stake in a school that I would be new to entering.”

### Developing

The developing leader is gaining leadership experience, learning to step out of his or her comfort zone, and beginning to frame and reframe situations.

Journal entry: “How will I deal with this difficult support staff? How do I motivate people who don’t have a work ethic? How do I change a culture that has been in place for years? How do I motivate my staff to take ownership? How do I get them to work as a team and view themselves as teammates?”

### Proficient

At the proficient stage, the candidate displays more confidence in leadership roles, has gained experience leading meetings, committees, professional learning, and coaching.

Journal entry: “Perhaps one of the most significant lessons I learned is the importance of remaining true to my inner passion and personal values and morals. ... Secondly, I want to remember that it is OK to not have all of the answers. ... I believe the most adept of individuals are those who have enough guts and understanding to admit when they do not know something. I believe these are the people who strive to learn, grow, and better themselves with honor and integrity, rather than masking their relative lack of knowledge.

“I also want to remember to serve others with kindness, fairness, and respect. ... I want to foster a safe and nurturing environment for all of my stakeholders — for both children and adults alike. I have a strong conviction that people who feel valued, appreciated, and loved will work harder and give more for the greater cause.

“Finally, I want to continue to embrace the process of deep self-reflection. ... Journaling my thinking has really helped me to grow as a student, teacher, future administrator, and individual in the real world.”

### Competent

A candidate who reaches the competent stage has accepted leadership responsibility, has built a repertoire of strategies, and displays confidence in his or her abilities.

Journal entry: “How fitting for me to be in the final week of my internship and I am the one in charge of the school for three days straight while the head of the school was out with strep throat. At the beginning of it all, I would have freaked out to be on my own, but now it was nothing! I wasn’t afraid, fearful, or nervous. I took it in stride and made decisions that needed to be made, fixed a substitute fiasco, and whisked a bunch of sophomores on their overnight retreat. Yes, crazy things happened, but I took everything in stride.

“I have grown more confident as an administrator and even realize that I have a voice that others listen to. I used to not say

anything because I was afraid of my ideas getting shut down. Now I stand up for what I believe and I offer opinions for situations. I am first and foremost an advocate for students and also the teachers. ... I feel very confident moving forward, and I feel confident in becoming a capable and understanding leader of a school in the future.”

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Using the Reflective Dialogue Journal approach, though labor-intensive, provides leadership candidates critical support and a partner to share ideas and test theories on a regular and as-needed basis.

Critical feedback can help guide the novice, present questions to help him think through a situation, provide tools or resources tailored to the learner’s needs or coaching that allows in-depth analysis of a particular issue, and, in some instances, provide intervention and counseling.

With Reflective Dialogue Journal, a candidate doesn’t need to wait until the next seminar to discuss concerns and risk sharing failures, to extend his or her understanding of and make connections with course-embedded readings or discussions, and to problem solve in action.

Timely feedback helps candidates deepen their understanding and move to competence more quickly. It also provides an early warning system that allows for early intervention.

This approach could also be used with student teachers, novice teachers, and beginning leaders in a variety of roles, including assistant principals, principals, directors, and superintendents.

Reflective Dialogue Journals build confidence and competence, creating reflective practitioners who learn to think in action.

### REFERENCES

**Bolman, L.G. & Deal, T.E. (2008).** *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Schön, D.A. (1987).** *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Karen Glinert Carlson (kcarlson@dom.edu) is assistant professor and division chair of educational leadership programs at Dominican University.**

**Kathleen Ann Harsy (harsyk@rbhs208.net) completed the school leadership licensure program at Dominican University and is an English teacher in Riverside Brookfield District 208 in Riverside, Ill.**

**Susan M. Karas (karasmsue@d83.org) is a graduate student in the educational administration program at Dominican University and a special education teacher in Manheim District 83 in Melrose Park, Ill. ■**