

Good leadership – is about connection and presence

Greg Whateley

October 2025

Often good leaders had to be the smartest people in the room – in truth this is no longer correct. Good leadership is about connecting with staff and externals in a meaningful way – developing trust, confidence and a feeling of belonging (being part of the team). This is a shift away from the traditional view. On reflection – good leadership is about presence.

I recently conducted an independent performance survey *of myself* (5 point scale) with my own immediate staff – and used 10 specific leadership/management skills/attributes identified in the literature –

Communication	4.9
Problem solving	4.7
Respect for others	4.9
Strategic thinking	4.9
Active listening	4.8
Empathy	4.8
Support	4.8
Conflict management	4.8
Team development and empowering	4.9
Adaptability	4.8
OVERALL	4.83

Interesting enough, at least six of the key indicators (highlighted) were related to **connecting** with staff – communication, respect, active listening, empathy, support, and team development/empowering.

In more recent times I commissioned an independent *staff survey* (SP3 2025) using standard metrics –

Survey Questions		SP1 2025	SP2 2025	SP3 2025
Q1	You are provided with the tools and resources to do your job well	3.14	4.80	5.00
Q2	Your job requirements are clearly communicated and goals and strategies are clearly defined	3.43	4.80	4.83
Q3	You feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things	4.00	4.80	4.83
Q4	Your supervisor visibly demonstrates a commitment to quality	4.71	5.00	5.00
Q5	You are satisfied with the level of involvement in decisions that directly affect your work.	3.14	4.80	5.00
Q6	AGE does a good job of keeping employees informed about matters affecting your	3.71	4.40	5.00
Q7	Overall, you are satisfied with your job?	4.29	4.80	5.00
Average		3.77	4.77	4.95

It is interesting to note that there is a close correlation between the leader and staff morale overall.

A national/international view

During my working career (now 52 years) I have had the opportunity to work/research in four States of Australia and five countries. This has provided me with a valuable set of experiences and observations of both leaders and managers within a diverse range of settings and institutions.

I have witnessed 'cultures' that have thrived, not because of policies, procedures, governance structures or metrics - *but because people felt safe and valued*. I saw teams that delivered results not just because they had to - *but because they wanted to*. This has been a critical learning experience for me.

Sadly, I have also seen/witnessed cultures that have essentially collapsed beneath the weight of bureaucracy, policy and protocol where morale was low and ideas never emerged, and *brilliant professionals burned out* – often in silence.

It was never about budget, technology or strategy. *It was always about the leader's presence and how they connected with their team/s.*

The importance of presence

Presence is not just about being physically available. It is about emotional clarity, it is about intention to listen, and the humility to let others be seen and heard.

Presence is by no means being soft. It is strategic. It shapes how people feel, how they perform, and whether they stay. It determines if great ideas ever get spoken aloud and if innovation takes root or dies in silence. In every thriving team I have witnessed - presence was the catalyst that shaped that culture.

This presence builds trust – often in ways unseen – such as hallway conversations, a coffee shared, a walk around the block/campus, offhand encouragement, formal acknowledgement and even a thoughtful pause before a difficult conversation/encounter.

How to build presence as a leader

Cultivating presence is not necessarily about adding another skill to your own toolkit. Rather, it is about possibly changing how you currently lead.

As a leader, you need to slow down long enough to *hear* what is not being said - you need to notice your *own emotional state* before reacting to someone else - and you need to choose *connection over control*.

It also means regularly considering - do people feel safer, more capable, and more seen after interacting with you? Because the *tone* is always set at the top, the impact, then, of your presence ripples further down than you can possibly imagine.

Good leadership is complex and difficult. It is NOT about being the smartest person in the room. Good leadership is about connecting with staff and being present. It is about developing trust, confidence and a feeling of belonging (being part of the team)

Also worth reading –

Leadership styles – a starting point - [6113ad_c482a119f6074198a97b17491e78dc7a.pdf](#)

Transformational leadership and the new reality -
[6113ad_94f769b047444a0082b26903741fa569.pdf](#)

Understanding Emotional Intelligence (EI) – and applying it to your leadership style and approach - [6113ad_688b923e84e44169b9420f3e8fd5d126.pdf](#)

Governance is about leadership not management -
[6113ad_4a2ffc930bcf4f8c81f115677e00326a.pdf](#)

Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley is currently Chief Executive and Executive Dean at the Australian Guild of Education (Melbourne).