

Creating a Wellbeing Environment: Positive Leadership Practices

"Authentic leaders are genuine in their intentions and understand the purpose of their leadership is to serve their community not their self-interest."

-Daniel Goleman



What is Positive Leadership?

Positive leadership is an approach that amplifies strengths, fosters wellbeing, and creates conditions for individuals and organisations to flourish. It transcends traditional leadership focused on control and efficiency, by emphasising **human-centered** values like **virtue**, **meaning**, and **growth** to amplify **performance**. Positive leaders aim to enable **excellence** and **resilience**, by viewing failure as a learning opportunity.

Positive leadership is not “feel-good” management; it’s a scientifically grounded approach that creates both human and organisational thriving.

Core principles of positive leadership

Positive leadership emphasises six generic core principles:

- **Affirmative Orientation:** focusing on strengths and solutions to spark positive spirals (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Fredrickson, 2001);
- **Virtuousness:** embedding compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, and integrity to build trust and resilience (Cameron, 2012; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006)
- **Empowerment:** supporting autonomy, mastery, purpose, and psychological safety to unlock motivation and voice (Deci & Ryan, 2017; Edmondson, 1999)
- **Relational Quality:** cultivating high-quality connections and relational trust marked by respect, competence, and personal regard (Dutton, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2002)
- **Resilience & Thriving:** enabling vitality and learning through challenge, strengthening adaptability and performance (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Porath et al., 2012)
- **Meaning & Purpose:** linking daily work to values and beneficiaries to heighten commitment and well-being (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Cameron, 2012).

Together, these principles create conditions in which people and organisations flourish, integrating rigorous scholarship with practical routines that elevate excellence, learning, and humane performance (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Principle	Description	What it Looks Like in Practice	Why It Matters	Linked Models/ Frameworks
Affirmative Orientation	Focus on strengths, possibilities, and solutions rather than deficits.	Leaders highlight successes, frame challenges as opportunities, and model positive language.	- Builds optimism, engagement, and resilience - Orienting toward “what works” generates positive affect and cognitive broadening - Strengthens meaning and collective efficacy.	- Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) - Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) - Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001)
Virtuousness	Embedding compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, and integrity in leadership actions.	Leaders model fairness, repair harm, and express gratitude consistently.	- Virtuous practices trigger “positive spirals” that elevate trust, collective resilience, and performance, especially in adversity - Compassion and forgiveness repair relationships and enable learning after failures.	- Virtuousness in Organizations (Cameron, 2012) - Compassion Organizing (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006) - Positive Spirals (Fredrickson, 2003)
Empowerment	Creating conditions for autonomy, mastery, purpose, and psychological safety.	Shared decision-making; choice within guardrails; clear purpose alignment; provide growth opportunities.	Drives motivation, creativity, and ownership.	- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017) - Psychological Safety (Edmondson, 1999)
Relational Quality	Building trust and high-quality connections through respect and reliability.	Active listening; transparent communication; consistent follow-through.	Predicts collaboration, improvement, and wellbeing.	- High-Quality Connections (Dutton, 2003) - Relational Trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002)
Resilience & Thriving	Enabling vitality and learning through challenge.	Normalise learning from setbacks; provide resources for coping and growth.	- Reduces burnout - Fosters adaptability and continuous improvement.	- Thriving at Work Model (Spreitzer et al., 2005) - Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) - Resilience Theory (Porath et al., 2012)
Meaning & Purpose	Connecting work to values and beneficiaries for significance and impact.	Leaders share purpose stories; showcase impact of work on community.	Enhances commitment, engagement, and wellbeing.	- Meaningful Work & Job Crafting (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) - Positive Leadership (Cameron, 2012)

Why is this important in education?

Positive leadership is critical in education because it fosters conditions for teacher efficacy, student engagement, and whole-school improvement that elevate excellence, equity and wellbeing in education. By emphasising strengths, purpose, and relational trust, positive leadership counters deficit-based approaches and builds cultures of collaboration and resilience (Cameron, 2012; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Research shows that high-quality connections and psychological safety enable educators to take risks, innovate, and learn from errors - key drivers of professional growth and student outcomes (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Edmondson, 1999).

Principles such as affirmative orientation and virtuousness promote optimism and ethical practice, which enhance morale and reduce burnout (Fredrickson, 2001; Dutton et al., 2006). Furthermore, linking work to meaning and purpose strengthens commitment and wellbeing, creating positive spirals of flourishing across the school community (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011). In short, positive leadership integrates evidence-based strategies that elevate excellence and equity in education (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Examples of positive leadership practices

Positive leadership in education focuses on creating a school culture that fosters wellbeing, growth, and collaboration for both staff and students. The following key practices are discussed further:

- **Positive communication:** Using strengths-based, respectful language to build psychological safety, belonging, and engagement.
- **Recognition and celebration:** Acknowledging achievements to boost motivation, engagement, and morale.
- **Trust and connection:** Building strong relational networks to enhance collaboration and collective efficacy.
- **Compassionate change management:** Leading transitions with empathy, understanding, and support for staff and students.
- **Meaningful measurement:** Using data and feedback thoughtfully to guide improvement and decision-making.

Positive communication

Positive communication is a core element of positive leadership and refers to intentional, strengths-based, respectful, and affirming ways of interacting that support learning, wellbeing, and performance (Cameron, 2012, 2013). Grounded in Positive Organizational Scholarship, positive communication emphasises language and interactions that preserve dignity, foster trust, and build relational capacity, particularly during challenge or change (Cameron, 2012). A key mechanism underpinning this approach is the heliotropic effect, which suggests that individuals and systems move toward what gives them life, meaning that providing more positive than negative feedback enhances motivation, engagement, and growth (Cameron, 2013). Positive communication is further supported by Broaden-and-Build Theory, which shows that positive emotions expand individuals' cognitive and emotional resources, enhancing problem-solving, resilience, and engagement (Fredrickson, 2001).

Positive communication also supports psychological safety, a key condition for learning environments in which students and staff feel safe to ask questions, admit mistakes, and contribute ideas (Edmondson, 2018). In educational contexts, the cumulative impact of daily interactions means that language choices directly shape belonging, motivation, and school culture. Research suggests that deficit-focused or shaming communication narrows attention and increases stress, while affirming, strengths-based language supports engagement, agency, and wellbeing (Cameron, 2013; Fredrickson, 2001).

In practice, positive communication involves:

- balancing high expectations with care
- using curiosity rather than judgement
- recognising effort and growth
- framing feedback as opportunities for learning.

For leaders and educators, these practices enable accountability without harm and contribute to sustainable, flourishing school communities.

Recognition and celebration

Recognition and celebration are essential practices for building a positive and energising school culture. When leaders **intentionally acknowledge the effort**, progress, and contributions of staff, it helps people **feel valued** and **reinforces the behaviours** that support strong teaching and learning. Cultures that value recognition often focus their attention on the **everyday moments** where educators show **care, creativity, professionalism, and persistence**.

Research across education and positive psychology shows that recognition strengthens relationships and supports wellbeing. The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) highlights that staff engagement increases when teachers feel appreciated and when their contributions are made visible within the community (CESE, 2020). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership also notes that effective leaders create environments where success is shared and where people feel seen in their efforts as well as their outcomes (AITSL, 2019). International studies echo this. Dutton (2003) found that authentic appreciation fosters high-quality connections, while Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory shows that positive emotions expand people's capacity to think, collaborate, and learn (Fredrickson, 2001).

Celebrating effort matters because it recognises the human side of teaching. It affirms the emotional labour involved in working with young people and acknowledges that progress often happens in small steps. When educators feel valued, they are more energised, more present, and more able to bring their best to the classroom, which directly benefits students through stronger relationships, higher engagement, and more consistent learning experiences.

In practice, celebration can be simple. It might involve:

- naming someone's thoughtful approach to a student
- recognising a colleague's persistence with a challenging task, or
- acknowledging the collective work of a team.

These micro-moments help build a positive climate where people feel supported and motivated to keep growing, reinforcing the idea that contribution matters and that every small effort plays a part in shaping the culture of the school and the learning environment students experience every day.



Trust and connection leads to collaboration

Trust and connection are at the heart of effective collaboration in schools. When educators feel respected, supported, and able to rely on one another, they are more willing to share ideas, take risks, and engage in the kind of professional dialogue that leads to genuine improvement. Decades of academic research has shown that high-trust environments create the psychological safety which is needed for staff to be honest about challenges, ask for help, and work together on solutions that benefit students and the broader school community.

Trust is one of the strongest predictors of collaborative cultures. Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe trust as a “moral resource” within schools and note that it grows when interactions are grounded in respect, integrity, and personal regard. They explain that “relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges” and that it shapes how willing people are to engage in the collective work of improvement. When trust is present, staff are more open to feedback, more generous in how they interpret one another's actions, and more committed to shared goals. This creates the conditions for authentic professional learning rather than surface-level cooperation.

Similarly, connection also plays a significant role in how teams work together. Studies highlight that strong interpersonal relationships support deeper professional inquiry, higher-quality problem solving, and improved instructional practices (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). In practical terms, this means creating regular opportunities for staff to collaborate, celebrate progress, and build shared understanding of the school's purpose and priorities. These relational routines are what helps educators feel part of something larger than their individual roles.

The aim of building a culture of high trust and connection, is to create an environment where **collaboration** becomes a natural way of working together. In high-trust and connected teams, we see staff that **feel safe to share practice**, **challenge thinking respectfully**, and **commit to collective goals**.

Compassionate change management

Compassionate change management is an approach to organisational transformation that integrates **strategic planning** with **empathy** and **care** for individuals affected by change. In educational leadership, this means acknowledging the **emotional impact** of **transitions** on staff and students, fostering **psychological safety**, and prioritising **wellbeing alongside institutional goals** (Westover, 2024).

Research highlights that compassionate leadership during change **reduces resistance**, **builds trust**, and **mitigates stress-related outcomes** such as burnout and attrition (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Corey & Watson, 2025). It emphasises transparent communication, active listening, and inclusive decision-making to create a collaborative environment (Vlachopoulos, 2021). Leaders who adopt compassionate practices such as validating emotions, pacing milestones, and celebrating progress, strengthen resilience and sustain positive culture during periods of uncertainty (Westover, 2024; Hashemi Toroghi et al., 2025).

This approach is critical in education because rapid systemic changes, coupled with pressures like accountability and post-pandemic recovery, have amplified stress among educators. Compassionate change management ensures that transformation is not only effective but also humane, aligning organisational success with human flourishing (Hashemi Toroghi et al., 2025; Corey & Watson, 2025).

Meaningful measurement

Meaningful measurement is all about collecting the right information at the right time with a clear purpose. In schools, data is most useful when it helps us understand **what** is really happening in practice and **why** it is happening. When leaders take this approach, measurement becomes **less about compliance** and more about **learning, improvement**, and **supporting** staff and students in a **thoughtful** way.

Australian research speaks strongly to this. The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) reminds us that data has the greatest impact when it is purposeful, timely, and directly linked to a school’s improvement priorities. This means being selective about what we collect and avoiding the trap of gathering information that is interesting but not actually useful. AITSL echoes this by highlighting that effective leaders use evidence that is relevant to their context and connected to clear goals (AITSL, 2019). These insights reinforce the idea that measurement should support professional judgement rather than replace it.

The AITSL Spotlight Papers also point out that data only becomes meaningful when educators make sense of it together. This process of talking, reflecting, and questioning is what turns information into insight. It connects well with the work of Earl and Kats (2006), who emphasise that data matters most when it prompts inquiry into **what is working** and **what needs some attention**. Timperley (2011) adds that measurement should act as a **springboard** for **professional learning** rather than a task that sits off to the side.

When leaders use measurement in this intentional way, it helps build clarity, confidence, and shared ownership across the school. Staff can see progress, identify emerging needs, and feel supported to adjust their practice. Meaningful measurement reinforces the idea that improvement is both possible and visible. It supports decision making that is human, informed, and responsive to the day-to-day realities of school life, helping create environments where both wellbeing and performance can flourish.

Further examples of positive leadership practices

The table includes information about other evidence-informed practices that leaders can implement to foster a culture of individual and organisational flourishing.

Practice	Description	What it Looks Like in Practice	Why It Matters	Linked Models/ Frameworks	Examples (Staff and Students)
Strengths-based development	Identify and leverage individual and team strengths to enhance engagement and performance.	Use strengths assessments; align tasks to strengths; celebrate unique contributions.	Increases engagement, confidence, and performance.	- Strengths-Based Leadership (Rath & Conchie) - Psychological Capital (Luthans)	- Teacher strengths mapping, strengths spotting and strengths based feedback - Student strengths portfolios - Project roles based on strengths
Cultivating positive emotions	Create rituals and environments that foster authentic recognition, gratitude, optimism, and hope.	Gratitude rituals; recognition systems; positive language norms.	Enhances creativity, resilience, and collaboration; strengthens relationships and morale.	- Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson) - Positive Organisational Scholarship Principles (Cameron)	- Start staff meetings with ‘Wins & Gratitude’ ‘Thanks Thursday’ posts - Student kindness credits - Teacher appreciation events - Student progress celebrations - Celebrate progress, not just outcomes
Appreciative inquiry conversations	Use inquiry to discover “what works” and co-create a shared vision for the future.	Discovery interviews; visioning workshops; design principles.	Builds energy, buy-in, and shared purpose.	Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider)	- AI summits for curriculum renewal - Student-led vision boards - Co-design sessions
Modeling virtuous behaviors	Leaders demonstrate compassion, forgiveness, and integrity consistently.	Transparent decision-making; repairing harm; fairness in processes.	Builds trust and psychological safety; strengthens culture.	Positive Organisational Scholarship Principles (Cameron)	- Restorative justice protocols - Integrity charters - Address conflict early using restorative, dignity-preserving approaches. - Modelling of hope and optimism (PsyCap)
Building high-quality connections	Foster respectful, reliable, and trust-based relationships.	Active listening; consistent follow-through; personal regard.	Predicts collaboration, improvement, and student success.	- High Quality Connections (Dutton) - Relational Trust (Bryk & Schneider) - Active listening and constructive responding (ACR)	- Staff norms for dialogue - Trust-building protocols - Parent-teacher partnerships - Begin meetings with brief check-ins
Empowering others	Provide autonomy, resources, and psychological safety to encourage voice and innovation.	Shared decision-making; choice within guardrails; inclusive facilitation.	Drives motivation, creativity, and ownership.	- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan) - Psychological Safety (Edmondson)	- Student choice in assessments - Teacher-led innovation projects - Safe feedback channels - Invest in mentoring, buddy systems and cross-role collaboration (teachers, support staff, leaders).
Purpose storytelling	Connect daily work to meaningful outcomes and societal impact.	Leaders share purpose narratives; showcase impact stories.	Enhances meaning, commitment, and resilience.	- Positive Leadership (Cameron) - Meaningful Work (Wrzesniewski)	- Assemblies highlighting student impact - Leader blogs on purpose - Alumni success stories - Stories highlighting contribution and difference made e.g. student, family or community impact stories
Resilience practices	Normalise learning from setbacks and adaptive thinking.	After-action reviews; reframing challenges; peer support systems.	Builds adaptability and reduces burnout.	- Thriving at Work (Spreitzer) - Resilience Theory	- Reflection prompts after exams - Resilience workshops - Peer coaching circles

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