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EMBRACING MESSY LEADERSHIP

How The Experience of
20,000 School Leaders Can
Transform You and Your School





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EMBRACING MESSY LEADERSHIP

Foreword by Pasi Sahlberg	xi
Acknowledgments	xiv
Chapter 1: School Leadership Is MESSY . . . and School Leaders Know It!	1
Chapter 2: <i>M</i> for Meaning Making	12
Chapter 3: <i>E</i> for Emotional Connection	34
Chapter 4: <i>S</i> for Sensing the Future	56
Chapter 5: <i>S</i> for Seizing Momentum	77
Chapter 6: <i>Y</i> for Your Presence	97
Chapter 7: Mindsets Matter	119
Chapter 8: Coaching Others in MESSY Leadership	131
Chapter 9: Developing Your MESSY Leadership Capabilities	141
Appendix A: MESSY Leadership Monitor	156
Appendix B: Breakthrough Thinking Guide	160
Appendix C: Four Faces of Coaching Questionnaire	162
References	164
Index	167
About the Authors	173

Foreword

Rebuilding education systems in a post-pandemic world is a process of collective transformation that will reimagine, reinvent, restructure—and improve—schools in ways we have never seen. As school leaders look for policies that will help them in this process, their role is entering a new spring, making proactive and visionary school leadership more important than ever. The transformation of education can start in everyday practice in schools, but it won't be easy, and it will require bold, innovative thinking about what school could be.

A clear, shared vision has always been central to successful school leadership, and now more than ever, leadership with a common purpose and shared direction is essential. Thankfully, this is the beating heart of Alyssa Gallagher and Rosie Connor's *Embracing MESSY Leadership*.

Two MESSY tools and strategies are worth highlighting here. The first is seizing momentum, which is about urging school leaders to be proactive and embrace new ways of thinking and working. Systemic change will likely continue to be slow and can't be taken for granted, so acting *now*, based on professional wisdom and expertise, is a critical part of effective leadership. The second is sensing the future, which requires leaders to think outside the box and ask questions such as "What could school be like?" Experimentation and innovation are the most promising tools to support leaders as they address daily challenges to

school improvement. The ability to engage in this future-focused thinking with colleagues is another aspect of leadership that we need in a post-pandemic world.

Change is slow without significant mindset shifts. This is no less true in school settings. Coaching and leading educators within schools to create new elevated mindsets is a precondition to systemwide cultural transformation.

The book you hold in your hands is a guide to proactive, collaborative, and inclusive education in a world that continues to be characterized by uncertainty, growing inequalities, and disruption. It not only offers new ways to think about leadership in times such as this but also contributes to every school leader's practical toolbox to tackle everyday challenges. The MESSY leadership model identifies and delivers personalized advice about three key principles of school leadership.

First, school leaders should prioritize adaptability and flexibility to navigate uncertainties—especially in a post-pandemic world. The ability to swiftly adjust to changing circumstances, whether they are related to public health, technology, or educational policies, is crucial. This includes embracing hybrid learning models (i.e., combining in-person and online learning), accommodating diverse student expectations and needs, and being prepared for potential disruptions to teaching and learning. School leaders should also foster an educational culture that values innovation and continuous professional learning, encouraging teachers and staff to adapt their approaches in ways that best serve students who live in communities that are constantly evolving.

Second, leaders need to recognize and address the social and emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, they should prioritize the mental health and well-being of both students and staff. Indeed, implementing comprehensive preventive mental health programs, promoting work-life balance, and creating a supportive environment for open communication are essential. Demonstrating empathy in decision making and understanding the unique challenges faced by individuals within the school community also fosters a sense of belonging and resilience.

Third, it's essential to recognize that a heightened focus on equity and inclusion is now required in schools. School leaders must work together with their

communities to eliminate educational inequalities that were exacerbated by or during the pandemic. This involves ensuring equitable access to technology, resources, and educational opportunities for all students. Furthermore, leaders should actively seek to address systemic inequalities with policymakers and their colleagues in other public sectors, engage with diverse perspectives, and create a learning environment that is inclusive and supportive of students from various backgrounds. Prioritizing equity in decision-making processes will contribute to a more just and resilient education system.

School leadership is key in addressing these principles in daily practice. Leading schools—and the diverse groups of people within them—is sometimes difficult, often imperfect, and always messy. Experienced school leaders know this and also understand the value of coaching and mentoring one another. Leadership, as research has shown, is a team sport, not an individual race for awards or recognition. The data behind this book also make this clear: Modern school leaders value and expect professional feedback, collegial empowerment and support, and a focus on the human side of school leadership.

—Pasi Sahlberg
professor of educational leadership,
University of Melbourne



School Leadership Is MESSY . . . and School Leaders Know It!

School leadership is messy. If you are a school leader, you may have already felt this intuitively for a long time. Maybe you attended a leadership program or have a degree in educational leadership and were inspired by what you learned . . . and then found it really difficult to apply in practice. Maybe you start each term with high aspirations for how you intend to raise the quality of teaching and learning . . . only to find that each week is swallowed up by an endless list of “messy people issues” to deal with.

We hear your pain! We lead the not-for-profit initiative BTS Spark, and our coaches have supported more than 20,000 school leaders around the world. Coaching conversations offer an opportunity for school leaders to pause amidst the busyness of their everyday work and develop their leadership capabilities. Coaching also provides a space for leaders to reflect on their practice, talk through their toughest challenges, and identify new approaches.

We have witnessed the most amazing transformations. Our coaches help school leaders discover their own greatness. Along the way, they renew their sense of purpose, make breakthroughs in even the most broken working relationships,

and find ways to collaboratively lead their school communities and improve the quality of education they provide to their students. Amazingly, 99 percent of all leaders who engage in coaching with BTS Spark report making a significant positive change in their leadership.

This book is grounded in the reality of leading schools: the lived experiences of thousands of school leaders—principals and team leaders—who have benefited from professional leadership coaching. If you have never been coached, then hopefully you will benefit from hearing others’ stories (the quotes embedded in each of the chapters come directly from leaders being coached), learning some tricks of the trade, and using some practical strategies and tools our coaches use to support school leaders with their biggest issues.



“Knowing that other school leaders have the same challenges and have found solutions has been really affirming.”

What Are the Biggest Issues School Leaders Face?

School leadership can be a lonely business. When you’re first promoted to lead a team or department, you may suddenly find yourself on your own. In previous roles, you likely had a network of colleagues you could talk to, sharing highs and lows, trading tips and resources, and so on. In the new role, though, you find yourself managing former peers (maybe even some of your friends) and the dynamic has fundamentally changed. Fast-forward a few years to when you’re a principal, and you may feel lonelier still: in the spotlight, under pressure to be all things to all people, and unable to confide in anyone for fear of breaking confidentiality or appearing weak.

Another challenge is the complexity of working with adults, be they teachers, staff, parents, other school leaders, or colleagues in your school district. As one



school leader explained, “I feel so much more confident working with children. It’s what I was trained to do as a teacher. Adults are a whole different ballgame.”

This book synthesizes our research from coaching thousands of school leaders over a five-year period (2018–2022). Most of these leaders were based in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, but others were from a host of different countries, including Singapore, Kenya, South Africa, and Indonesia. They included school principals, assistant/deputy principals, department heads, instructional coaches, and some directors and superintendents. Even though their locations and job roles varied widely, the differences in their coaching needs did not vary as much as you might expect. Many of the challenges school leaders face are, indeed, universal.

When a school leader is talking with a coach, both understand that it’s a safe space and all conversations are confidential. This sense of safety and security typically allows school leaders to open up and speak their truths. At the outset, each school leader needs to agree with their coach on their key objective: the shift they

would most like to make in their leadership. Usually, this is closely tied to a sticky challenge with which they are grappling.

Although every coaching conversation is one-to-one and personalized—and every school leader’s context is unique—many face quite similar issues. Indeed, when we analyzed a sample of 1,700 school leaders’ coaching objectives, we identified these nine common issues, ranked in order of frequency:

1. Giving feedback; having the courage to hold difficult conversations and hold others accountable.
2. Empowering and coaching others; not fixing others’ problems; delegating and letting go.
3. Engaging others; getting buy-in; influencing others to change their practice.
4. Building confidence and personal authority; overcoming “imposter syndrome.”
5. Slowing down; being less task-oriented; taking the time to be more people-oriented.
6. Getting things done; managing time; not procrastinating.
7. Attending to one’s well-being and resilience; learning to say *no*; setting personal boundaries.
8. Seeing the bigger picture; prioritizing; taking the time to think strategically.
9. Creating a shared purpose; building a team vision; fostering greater collaboration.

Now imagine that you are embarking on a coaching journey and your coach asks you what your biggest win would be as an outcome of your coaching conversations. What would you name as your top issue? Is it one of the nine issues we identified or is it unique?

The Human Side of School Leadership

It’s interesting to note that many of the top issues named by school leaders tap into their relational skills. Giving feedback, empowering others, getting buy-in, and building collaboration all require highly developed **inter**personal skills,

and many others draw on our all-important **intrapersonal** skills (e.g., self-confidence, slowing down, managing your personal resilience).

Around half of all BTS Spark coaching conversations focus on supporting school leaders with relational leadership: widening their interpersonal skillset and strategies to handle complex interpersonal issues and work effectively with other teachers, school leaders, parents, and district colleagues. Around one-third of our coaching conversations focus on helping leaders develop their intrapersonal skills: building their confidence, increasing their self-awareness, and deepening their emotional intelligence.



“I’ve had a lot of professional development in the past, but coaching has been like the missing piece in the puzzle for me. My coach helped me to work out how to support teachers and empower them. It’s fundamentally changed the way that I work and lead.”

These priorities may not be a surprise to you. Nevertheless, they are rarely adequately reflected in leadership development programs offered to school leaders. Many courses continue to emphasize technical management skills (e.g., budgeting, human resources, health and safety), school improvement planning, and curriculum development. These are, of course, important, but we need to consider a “both and” approach here. It is unhelpful to expect school leaders to improvise their responses to scores of daily interpersonal challenges—especially since we know a silent majority of school principals globally have had little or no training for the job (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

We use the phrase *the human side of school leadership* to emphasize the importance of both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that school leaders need to utilize (Slade & Gallagher, 2022). If you need further confirmation of this,

look no further than the word cloud in Figure 1.1, which depicts the keywords that came out most strongly from our recent analysis of over 6,500 summary notes taken by coaches after their coaching conversations with school leaders.

FIGURE 1.1

Word Cloud Showing Most Common Keywords in Coaching Conversations



We do not intend to slide into the well-worn debate between instructional and transformational leadership; we believe this has been set up as a false dichotomy. It is a no-brainer that the quest to improve the quality of teaching and learning needs to serve as a north star to guide how school leaders spend their time, attention, and resources. Instructional leadership approaches can serve as helpful guides here. However, school leaders can only effectively drive change and improvement efforts by building capability and inspiring their teams, thus epitomizing the transformational leadership approach. What schools today urgently need is a combination of both instructional leadership and transformational leadership.

Recent research points to the importance of a combination of development strategies that include instructional, pedagogical, and transformational leadership to guarantee schoolwide success (Day et al., 2016). Great schools have great leaders who significantly influence and create improvements in teaching and learning, school culture, and the school's overall operation. All these improvements indirectly improve student learning outcomes.

Balancing the Me, Us, and It of School Leadership

What do we mean by the human side of school leadership? One model that helps many school leaders is super simple: the Me Us It model. Imagine three overlapping circles, where each circle represents an element of your work. The three circles are

It: This includes all the work you do as a school leader to provide a high-quality education for students and anything you do that improves teaching and learning, including activities such as teacher observation and evaluation, professional development, strategic planning, and budgeting.

Us: This includes all the relationships you have with stakeholders and the culture you want to create in your school in order to provide a high-quality education.

Me: This is the kind of leadership you need to model (and the personal shifts you may need to make) in order to achieve your goals for *it* and *us*.

Ideally, you want each element (*Me*, *Us*, *It*) to receive equal attention, but that is rarely how it plays out. As a school leader, you are probably continuously juggling all three without realizing it. That juggle is difficult, though, and many school leaders find that their time and attention is so overwhelmingly focused on *It*—putting student learning first, as it should be—that they neglect investing sufficient time in forging effective working relationships (i.e., *Us*) . . . and the *Me* component is often left behind completely!



“I know that I have to put on my own oxygen mask first so I can be effective for staff and students . . . but it’s hard to do in practice.”

You Matter . . . Hugely

Does it matter if the *Me* takes a back seat? Surely, the student learning experience should be what it's all about? One could argue that the needs of the adults in a school—the needs of you and your colleagues—should take a back seat to students' needs, but is that sustainable?

Students' needs should be paramount. There's no arguing that. Still, students both need and deserve great leaders. If you're trying to make any changes to improve the quality of education that your students receive, then you're going to need buy-in from teachers, staff, parents, and the students themselves. Don't underestimate the importance of investing in the *Us*; it's essential to build the capability of colleagues, engage with stakeholders, and nurture the culture in your school that will support the changes you want to see.

Most importantly, don't neglect the ultimate truth: you matter enormously. Numerous studies point to the massive impact that the quality of school leadership has on the quality of education that students receive. Leithwood and colleagues (2008) famously cited school leadership as “second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (p. 28). This was qualified in a more recent article and the original claim revised: “School leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning. While moderate in size, this leadership effect is vital to the success of most school improvement efforts” (Leithwood et al., 2020, p. 6).

The Wallace Foundation analyzed data from 22,000 principals and made the startling finding that replacing an ineffective elementary school principal (rated at the 25th percentile for leadership effectiveness) with an effective elementary school principal (rated at the 75th percentile) produces average student gains across the entire school amounting to three months of learning in both math and reading (Grissom et al., 2021). Very simply stated, effective school leadership positively influences student achievement. You can debate how leadership effectiveness was ranked, but this does give pause for thought.

The MESSY Leadership Model

It's clear that school leaders matter, and it therefore pays dividends to invest in your leadership. In this book, we've crystallized the latest in leadership thinking and provide practical strategies and tools to strengthen your leadership capabilities. The original MESSY leadership model arose from work with leaders across all sectors (private, public, and not-for-profit). During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, chief learning officers from more than 40 of the world's top organizations were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the types of leaders who were most successful at leading their organizations through a period of great uncertainty (Connor et al., 2020). Out of that work, the term *MESSY leadership* evolved to describe the surprising traits these leaders exhibited (Figure 1.2).

Once the notion of MESSY leadership was born, we found that the associated concepts gained strong traction among school leaders. Through numerous conference keynotes, we shared the key themes around MESSY leadership with school leaders at all levels and discovered that they not only loved having the so-called messiness of their jobs out in the open but also enjoyed being challenged with an aspirational model of leadership they could strive toward. All that was missing were practical strategies that would help them expand their leadership toolkit and make confident steps toward becoming MESSY leaders.

Our coaches of course do this—one conversation at a time. They draw on BTS Spark's expansive curriculum of 33 leadership mindsets and coach school leaders to unlock their potential, shift their mindsets, and embrace new approaches to strengthen their leadership practice. (More on this in Chapter 7.) This book attempts to share these insights, strategies, and tools with you.

FIGURE 1.2

The MESSY Leadership Model



Your Journey to Becoming a MESSY Leader

Over the next five chapters, we will unpack the five key traits and mindsets of MESSY leadership. Adopting these specific mindsets will make it easier for you to lead in a complex world:

Meaning Making will help you create a shared vision and engage others (both staff and stakeholders) in this work by collaborating more effectively.

Emotional Connection will help you build deeper, more trusting working relationships to give feedback and hold difficult conversations where needed.

Sensing the Future will help you think outside the box and tackle entrenched school improvement problems through experimentation and innovation.

Seizing Momentum will help you be proactive, gain control of how you prioritize your time, and embrace new ways of working.

Your Presence will help you build your confidence as a leader, understand what holds you back, and learn how you can overcome this.

The final three chapters will then show how you can make a shift in your mindset to create a sustained shift in your leadership practice, along with strategies you can use to coach others on your team. This is what transformational leadership coaches do well, of course, but we will help you understand the principles behind mindset work and share some basic approaches to get you started.

There is no prize for reading every chapter in order. In fact, we encourage you to dip in and out of chapters as they feel relevant to your current leadership experience and journey. If you have a pressing need to address, why not fast-forward to the relevant chapter?

Each chapter includes

- A key challenge to identify the larger problem to be solved.
- A key idea that challenges conventional leadership wisdom and embraces new perspectives to get you thinking about your leadership differently.

- A detailed description of the relevant mindset shift so you can get a clear understanding of what it entails.
- A MESSY monitor, which encourages you to self-reflect on where your current leadership practice lies with respect to this aspect of MESSY leadership.
- Case studies that illustrate how other school leaders have embraced this new way of working, with support from our coaches. (All case studies are based on real school leaders we have coached, but various details have been changed to ensure total anonymity.)
- Insights from our amazing coaches around the world.
- Practical tools that provide scaffolds for integrating key MESSY concepts into your everyday conversations and leadership practice.
- Tips and “aha moments” from school leaders that relate helpful advice to understand new concepts and embrace new strategies. (You’ll find many of these show up in sidebar quotes throughout the book.)
- Go-do actions that challenge you to immediately apply MESSY leadership tools and ideas in your everyday work.

Above all, we hope that this book will help you find a simple way to lead in today’s complex world. We have worked with dozens of MESSY Pioneers—practicing school leaders across four continents who have embraced and trialed the MESSY leadership concepts—and been inspired by their efforts. As a result, we have woven many of their experiences into this book so it can serve as a practical handbook. For a printable toolkit of MESSY leadership resources to share with your team, go to btsspark.org/messyleadership.

We stand on the shoulders of giants: 20,000 school leaders who have engaged in coaching with us to strengthen their leadership, 300 coaches in 37 countries, and 1,000 leadership experts within our organization. With that kind of support, our job as authors was easy.

Schools need MESSY leaders. We wish you all the best in your efforts to become a MESSY leader.

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About the Authors



Alyssa Gallagher co-leads BTS Spark in North America, helping school leaders across the United States and Canada access leadership coaching and professional development. Alyssa combines experience of school leadership and school district administration with expertise in leadership development. She spent 20 years in the U.S. public education K–12 sector, filling many roles, including teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent.

Under Alyssa’s guidance, Los Altos School District (California) became a nationally recognized leader in educational innovation, and her work was featured on CNN and by *Forbes*, *Wired*, *The Economist*, and *60 Minutes*. She worked with Sal Khan to lead the first ever pilot of Khan Academy in classrooms across an entire school district. Alyssa then served as director of global leadership for the Wiseman Group, guiding leaders to make everyone around them smarter and more capable.

Alyssa has coauthored two books with Kami Thordarson on using design thinking to improve teaching and learning: *Design Thinking for School Leaders: Five Roles and Mindsets That Ignite Positive Change* (2018) and *Design Thinking in Play: An Action Guide for Educators* (2020).

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Rosie Connor founded BTS Spark and has led its educational leadership development and coaching work for over a decade. As global director, she has designed and launched hundreds of leadership development programs for school leaders across four continents. Motivated by a passion for supporting school leaders and teachers to do their best work, Rosie brings 25 years of experience in educational leadership.

As chief executive of one of Tony Blair’s Education Action Zones, her leadership in turning around 19 failing schools was described by independent inspectors as “outstanding” and was nominated by England’s Department for Education as a national flagship. Working with the UK’s National College for School Leadership and the Innovation Unit, Rosie advised schools on how to form successful professional learning communities. After emigrating to Australia, she worked with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership to lead the launch of the national professional standard for school principals.

Rosie was selected as a 2023 Most Influential Educator by Australia’s *The Educator* magazine. She collaborates with the World Innovation Summit for Education, OECD2030, and leading-edge school systems on future-focused school leadership post-pandemic. She can be reached at rosie.connor@btsspark.org.



BTS Spark is a not-for-profit global educational leadership practice, dedicated to supporting school leaders to build their capability to lead their school communities effectively. Its mission is to provide schools with access to world-class leadership coaching and workshops at not-for-profit prices.

BTS Spark collaborates with school systems, school districts, educational leadership institutes, not-for-profit organizations, universities, and schools to unlock the leadership potential of education leaders. Its global team of 300 professional accredited leadership coaches span 37 countries and six continents and are available to support school leaders in 34 world languages.

BTS Spark has developed a comprehensive evidence-based curriculum of 33 leadership mindsets and capabilities that underpin effective school leadership, enabling professional development to be targeted at different levels of education leaders and personalized to individuals' needs.

BTS Spark is the social impact arm of BTS, a multi-award-winning global leadership consultancy. BTS Spark collaborates with OECD2030, World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), Global Education Leaders' Partnership (GELP), UNESCO, and progressive school systems worldwide.

To find out more about BTS Spark's MESSY leadership and coaching programs, contact hello@btsspark.org or browse the website at <https://btsspark.org>.

Related ASCD Resources: School Leadership

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

Design Thinking for School Leaders: Five Roles and Mindsets That Ignite Positive Change by Alyssa Gallagher & Kami Thordarson (#118022)

Design Thinking in Play: An Action Guide for Educators by Alyssa Gallagher & Kami Thordarson (#120030)

The EQ Way: How Emotionally Intelligent School Leaders Navigate Turbulent Times by Ignacio Lopez (#123046)

The Principal as Chief Empathy Officer: Creating a Culture Where Everyone Grows by Thomas R. Hoerr (#122030)

Small Shifts, Meaningful Improvement: Collective Leadership Strategies for Schools and Districts by P. Ann Byrd, Alesha Daughtrey, Jonathan Eckert, & Lori Nazareno (#123007)

Stop Leading, Start Building: Turn Your School into a Success Story with the People and Resources You Already Have by Robyn R. Jackson (#121025)

What If I'm Wrong? and Other Key Questions for Decisive School Leadership by Simon Rodberg (#121009)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at www.ascd.org/el. To contact us, sent an email to member@ascd.org or call 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600.