# Transcript

**Leading from the middle**

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Introduction:

You’re listening to the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership podcast where we showcase conversations with some of the world’s biggest thought leaders in education. We also bring you the thoughts and reflections of teachers and school leaders from across Victoria.

Greg Lacey:

My name's Greg Lacey and I'm a Principal in Residence here at the Academy and I work in the Middle Leader programs. Joining me today are Dave Faulkner, who's the CEO of EC by Go1, and Glenn Solomons, one of EC's key facilitators. EC is a partner with the Academy in our work to develop world-class leadership in Victorian schools. Today we are discussing the critical importance of thriving and empowered middle leaders in our schools, their learning needs, and what many years of experience in this field has taught our two guests this afternoon. Thanks for joining us, Dave and Glenn, let's jump in. Dave, you worked in schools for quite some time prior to this. What brought you into the world of professional learning out of schools?

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, thanks. I guess, well I was a principal teacher and working right across Western Australia in the Northern Territory for a number of years, and for me, one of the gaps that I saw was that we needed to provide really great capacity and upskilling for new teachers, middle level leaders, really people at all levels. But one of the things that I became really passionate about when I was in the Northern Territory was seeing this sort of opportunity where really great, talented people early in the profession were maybe exiting three to five years in. I started to ask some questions, why are they exiting the profession? Why are they leaving? Why are we losing some of this great talent?

So I'd asked, and I have a lot of stories with these individuals, and one of the things I was hearing back was, "I don't feel like I'm having the opportunity to lead early enough." So for me, that was a bit of a catalyst for starting Education Changemakers, was looking and saying, "How can we better support the professionals that are early stage in their career that want to lead?" That's really what led me to this sort of professional learning opportunity to help support and enable systems and schools to develop those leaders.

Greg Lacey:

So tell us a little bit about your company, EC.

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, so Education Changemakers really exists to provide professional learning and support to the places that need it most, people in schools. So our whole approach is to design and deliver really high quality, engaging professional learning that meets the needs of people where they're at. Much more than the what and why, we think that's really important, but how do you actually do that on a Tuesday afternoon in a school? What does that look like for a middle level leader to really design and deliver high quality learning in a school and then to troubleshoot some of the challenges that they might come across on the day-to-day basis? Being a teacher and a school leader for us at EC, that was super important. So that's really why we exist, is to really find ways that we can best enable and support people on the ground at the grassroots level.

Greg Lacey:

Great, thanks. Glenn, you've been a facilitator with EC for quite some time. Tell us a little bit about your background.

Glenn Solomons:

Yeah, thanks, Greg. So I was a teacher in more regional areas of Victoria. I was able to jump into leadership pretty early in my career and really caught the bug for leadership, but just over two and a half years ago, one of the key parts of my last leadership position in a school was delivering professional learning, usually on the worst time, on a Thursday afternoon or a Monday afternoon when everyone's really tired. But I felt really energized and passionate about working with staff and the opportunity from EC came up. I'd read Edupreneur, EC's book, previously and the opportunity to work with teachers at a more, I guess, greater level, to have a greater impact on not only the teachers that I was working with in the school that I worked at, but Australia and even globally as well.

So I jumped across just over two and a half years ago with EC and it's been an amazing opportunity to work with the likes of the Academy, but also across various states, and like Dave, support teachers and school leaders, sometimes just that outside perspective to come across and give them that support, but also facilitate that professional learning where they walk away with really practical tools to improve learning in their schools.

Greg Lacey:

Great, thanks very much for that. So for those listing who may not be from schools, who are the middle leaders? What do they do? How do they fit into the school ecosystem and what impact do they have in schools?

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, it's a really dynamic term, isn't it, middle leader? If you go to different places, you're going to get interpretations that are different from different people. One of the things that I would say is really important is that a middle level leader is somebody who is leading change or is leading initiatives within their school, and that can be both from a formal or informal sense.

So I don't think you have to have a formal title to be a middle level leader. Middle level leaders can have titles and be in that formal leadership capacity, but they can also be those people that are aspiring into that and are naturally leading within their school context, because we see some great middle level leaders in some of the small schools where you might not have the formal positions, but they exist and they're doing the actions. We always say leadership is an action, not a position. So those middle level leaders are really those people in the school at that tier of taking those big strategic directions and ideas and putting them into action and leading them on the ground.

Greg Lacey:

So Glenn, you deal with a lot of these middle leaders. I mean, who are the people who come into your programs and what are your impressions?

Glenn Solomons:

So they are varied, as Dave said, they often wear many hats, often that formal leadership role or informal, and they're really in that special, I say special, difficult sometimes as well, positionality in a school, where all of a sudden they may have stepped out of the classroom slightly and now they're leading their peers. So middle leaders can be those people who are leading, a head of department, visual arts for example, or a coordinator. In the emerging leaders programs you've got PLC leaders or team leaders of a subject area as well. So it is, as Dave said, really, really varied, but what I do find about middle leaders is they are very, very passionate about the initiative or the improvement or the change that they're driving in their school. It can be a difficult balance because you are, like Dave said, getting strategic directions that maybe have been filtered down to you and it is your job to implement. So that can be a difficult balance if there isn't some groundwork done beforehand.

Greg Lacey:

I guess the assumption from some people is that these middle leaders are generally younger teachers and that has an implication on how you go about the professional learning. What are your reflections on that?

Glenn Solomons:

Yeah, I would say we're very inclusive of all ages when we run the professional learning, but I think the way we deliver professional learning with EC, it's a fun atmosphere to walk into and we really believe that that fun and rigor are not mutually exclusive. We can have a joke, we can have a laugh, we can have some music pumping when you walk in the room, and it's all about bringing energy. Because us at EC, we are really passionate about the work that we do, and we kind of feel like we want to set the scene for that passion when they walk into the room, that we are here to make really clear plans, not talk about theory and research all day. While it is really, really important, as Dave said, when I walk out of here, what am I going to do tomorrow with staff member A and have a conversation, a difficult conversation with them? What tools have I been given to hit the ground running, really?

Dave Faulkner:

I think we want to develop learning that we want to engage in ourselves, and I don't think it matters whether you're 25, 45, or 65. At the end of the day, you want to be engaged in the learning. You want to be seeing that it's practical, seeing that it's interesting, as Glenn said, enjoying it along the way. I don't think anyone goes into a classroom or an adult learning environment thinking, well, I hope it's boring because that'll mean it's really rigorous. I don't think that ever happens.

So it's this evidence, that making sure that we have rigor and evidence behind what we're presenting, but find the best way to enable that as digestible learning that can be quickly applied for anyone in adult learning, and the same that we would say for student learning as well. In that sense. I don't think there's a way that adults learn completely differently. We all like to have fun, enjoyable learning experiences, no matter what they are, whether it's listening to a podcast or watching a video or face-to-face in a workshop, that's really important. So that's how we tend to design the learning, but I think that that is certainly engaging for middle level leaders and it's great for them early in their career, I think, to see that professional learning can be highly engaging, enjoyable, and rigorous.

Greg Lacey:

I've been listening to Jim Knight the last couple of days with his instructional coaching model, and one of the things he harps on about... I shouldn't say harps on, that sounds a bit negative. One of the things he keeps stressing is the importance of emotionally compelling goals, connecting with people's hearts in terms of the work. How do you find that works with your young leaders?

Glenn Solomons:

Yeah, I think with any strategic direction or initiative that's happening in a school, it can almost have, it sounds strange, the person removed from the initiative or idea. It's like, oh, we need to reach this NAPLAN target, for example, but not understanding that those NAPLAN targets, they're students and kids sitting behind those, or we need to upskill our staff in developing formative assessment practices really effectively in the classroom, they're people. They're teachers who are at varying levels of their career too.

So the important part of when we are delivering professional learning and they are working or driving an initiative, it's who are the people that are sitting behind this? Because when you're leading change, it's tough. Especially when it's something new and you're upskilling people, they're consciously unskilled in something and all of a sudden they are going to be in the trenches to try and learn a new skill, you have to remember that they're people. I think sometimes as teachers we forget that, that we just go, oh, we're all professionals, we just go and we do it. But we're all at different stages, so that personal aspect is really important to building that relational trust, and not only with the kids that you stand in front of every day, but also with the team that you are leading, no matter if that's 10 or three people as well.

Greg Lacey:

The relational trust is a really important part of our leadership framework. Is that a big discussion with young leaders?

Glenn Solomons:

Definitely. I think for change to happen effectively, you need a relationship. People need to trust you, to know that they'll walk into the classroom and try something, whether it be a restorative conversation or giving kids some feedback that if it doesn't exactly go to plan, that's okay. What can we learn from it? So I think it's really, and Dave's got a good saying, about relationships and trust as well, and change.

Dave Faulkner:

It's one of the mantras I learned, is relationships are the currency for change, aren't they? If you don't have that basis, really you've got nothing to transact on in regards to trying to get that change to happen. So it's that investment in relational trust, in relationships, and really understanding the dynamic nature of them that is really important for being able to make change. As a middle level leader early in your career, understanding that and how important it is, I think, is essential to set them up for success. So we have to make sure that we build that into the design of the program and how do we teach relational trust? How do we teach building those relationships, investing in those relationships through both leading yourself and leading others as well?

Greg Lacey:

I feel like trust maybe gives you a little bit of a space as a leader, people are willing to cut you a bit of slack,

Dave Faulkner:

You can make some mistakes.

Greg Lacey:

There's a level of trust. It probably takes us into the next topic around the real complexity of middle leadership. They're leading up, they're leading sideways, they're leading across. They're stepping up from teacher to teacher leader, they're negotiating and learning alongside friends who are now team members, who are now the people that they're leading. Talk to us about the complexity of that role.

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, look, I think it's probably, in all of my career, I've been a middle level leader, a principal, a district superintendent, and the most complex role I've ever had probably in relation to this, maybe because of the stage of the career but also just the complexity of leading from the middle is super challenging, because as you said, Greg, we step out from probably the classroom, we'll still be in the classroom most likely, teaching maybe 0.6, 0.8, but we'll also be leading possibly a team of our peers and it's that one step removed.

So this complexity of, as you say, going from personal colleague and working in a group of teachers to leading that team can be a huge challenge for that early stage leader to step into and take quite comfortably. Now, they might've already taken an informal leadership role in the past, and that might make it a little bit easier, but the reality is really designing it and teaching people, how do you make sure you are able to lead, maintain those strong relationships, but define those boundaries between the personal relationship you might have with colleagues and friends and the professional relationship that you need to have so that you can have the professional dialogue and conversations and growth conversations, and sometimes challenging conversations, that you might need to have with some of your colleagues?

Greg Lacey:

So the complexity of the conversations for middle leaders, as you said, can be learning conversations, can be influencing conversations, and the influencing conversations are probably some of the more important ones. What are some of the skills that you think middle leaders need to have that influence? Because they may not be in a formal leadership position, they may be in a formal leadership role, but they still need to understand the power of influence in their leadership.

Glenn Solomons:

Yeah, and it's important, part because there are different power balances that we see in schools, and if you don't have that recognized leadership position, it can take people some time to get on board with something. That's why having the evidence to make sure and the research, whether that be jumping on the Academy's website and finding some resources, or the departments as well, and digging deeper, it's important that we have the research and evidence behind the decisions that we make. Always, any decision that I made as a middle leader was always, okay, what is best for the kids? How are we going to maximize our impact as teachers in the classroom? Sometimes that can take some work upfront to get those done, but I think every teacher, well most, are probably in the classroom because they want to improve learning for kids.

So if it is as a team we need to learn a new skill, it's going to take some time, I'm here to support you. I've done the reading and the research, for example, if I'm the leader leading it. I'm here to support you. It's okay to make that mistake and do it, as long as we come back, we reflect what worked, what didn't. That can be a way, as well as building trust, it's okay, this isn't Glenn's whim that he thinks, oh, this is fantastic, I saw this at X, Y, and Z conference, now I'm going to plug and play it in our school. No, this is what the data or the evidence and the research says that we need to improve our literacy results or our numeracy results. So having that research and evidence-based is really, really important.

Dave Faulkner:

I think one of the other skills that you also need to have here if I'm a middle level leader is the ability to have clear, concise growth conversations. So teaching people some protocols around how do you walk into a meeting well-prepared to say, "This is what we're trying to achieve," just like we do in a lesson. These are our learning objectives, this is the goal of what we're trying to achieve in this conversation, these are the things that we want to get out of it, and coming up with those agreed outcomes. This isn't just for difficult conversations, it's just to have that real clarity. We all like to walk out of a meeting and go, right, these are my three actions, this is what I need to do. So teaching people how to explicitly model that when they go into meetings while maintaining authenticity so it doesn't become so formulaic that you feel like, oh, here we go, I've got a meeting and it's A, B, C.

It's actually, you can still have a conversation, but you're not confusing the sort of, "Hey, how'd you go with your football on the weekend and the basketball on the weekend? By the way, you need to do this in your classroom. Oh, how's Jane at home?" You need to be able to... How to refine those things, because I think it's something that we all do a little bit of, it's just natural. You want to have that really personal conversation and then sometimes it just blurs the line into professionalism and you don't go away with the clarity you might need because you're remembering the fun conversation rather than some of the professional outcomes that you were trying to get from that.

Greg Lacey:

It leads us into a conversation about feedback, and I know some people see feedback as pat me on the back and tell me how good I am, but that's not genuine and it's not authentic. What are the conversations around feedback? What are the important things that young leaders need to understand about that?

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, I think from my point of view, and Glenn does lots of this sort of coaching of middle level leaders, so he's going to have some really great recent insights into this, but for me, when I think about the feedback that a middle level leader needs to have, for me it's about having the skill of both identifying the strengths and how to actually go from that strengths based and be able to build on that. So not just going, "Great, you are good at this," it's having that next step. Whether it's be an area that you need to work on or it's a strength that you have, always having a clear tangible to be always getting better.

It's one of our mantras at EC, "How do I always get better?" It doesn't matter if I'm the best coach in the world, doesn't matter if I'm the best player in the world, doesn't matter if I'm the best learning designer, it's how do I always get better? So utilizing our strengths to make sure that we can have a next step. So if I say, "You know what? You are fantastic at giving your students feedback in the classroom. What I'd like to see is you working with the teacher next door to help with that as well." Giving some clear tangibles that help growth in both those areas of weakness, or challenging areas, and those areas that you have as strengths is really key for feedback. Giving people clear things to walk away with and go, great, I can be always getting better here.

Glenn Solomons:

I think a part of that is also knowing your people and your team. So when you're actually differentiating the feedback for your team members, just like our kids, they pick up things. People have some trigger points or things that may be more precious to them as well, so it's important that we know our people. So it could be you might have a staff member that you're working with that when you're giving feedback, they want really concrete examples of, okay, what does that look like? Other people might want that conversation where you're kind of coaching them along for them to say what great teaching practice in formative assessment looks like, for example. It's about knowing your people and understanding how they like to receive feedback because, as I said, just like our kids, we're at all different levels and we've all got things we're great at and all things that we need work on.

So understanding who your people are, but also where they're at as well. Some people might like to receive feedback as a group, others will like that private conversation in the staff room when there's no one watching and just having that personal conversation. So I think differentiating the feedback is really important. It's one of the key features of our Impact Program that we run, is mapping your team almost. Okay, here are these different types, archetypes almost of your team, recognizing them and then coming up with a really clear plan on how am I going to differentiate feedback in two weeks time after I run some professional learning and I'm doing some classroom observations? So a really, really important part.

Greg Lacey:

You mentioned coaching before and I'm a great advocate for coaching, it's something I've used in my school for the last 12 or 14 years as a really effective tool. Tell us about your experiences in coaching and how it supports middle leaders to continue to improve.

Glenn Solomons:

I think sometimes it's about asking the right questions, really. The coaching that I've done over the last few years, definitely it's about... Teachers and middle leaders are amazing, but we talk about EC as the collective genius when we walk into a workshop, that we acknowledge that there is so much knowledge in the room. So when you're coaching, a big part that I do is asking that outsider perspective on something. It might be just asking that particular question that just triggers a point. Ah, okay, I'm going to definitely come to that person a little bit differently.

In comparison, when I'm doing coaching, it's really distinguished between that mentoring where you are really offering that really distinct advice, and sometimes it's just about prodding and asking those questions or "Have you considered X, Y, and Z?" is an important part. It's something that probably in my school, when I was working in a school, didn't happen very often. I was probably mentored a lot more. So just to have that person to touch base with, whether it be passing by in a workshop, at lunchtime, or jumping on a Zoom call and having that chat, it can be really, really helpful.

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, I think from our point of view in that sort of coaching element, we have this saying at EC, which is the only thing more powerful than ownership is authorship. That is really the difference between mentoring and coaching when you think about it, right? It's actually when you coach somebody, they get to author the change. They really walk into it and they say, "This is what I did," because you've helped them to discover it. You will need mentors along the way and you need to get inputs in to help you with those strategies that you need, but actually what's really powerful with what Glenn's saying about what we find about the coaching questions is that you're enabling people to author their own destiny.

They know their school best, they know their team, they know their students much better than an outsider is ever going to, and so asking the right questions is absolutely key. Will they make some mistakes along the way? Haven't we all? We've all made plenty of mistakes in our different roles as we go, but you learn from those and a great coach will be able to find teaching moments in those to say, "What can we learn from this if we've fallen over?" Also, when we've been very successful, not just to celebrate those wins, but to say, "Okay, great. What was it? Let's unpick that a little bit. What was it that made it so good?" That's what a coach does, is they ask those discovery questions that really get you thinking, what is it about this that did work or didn't work, and what can I do next?

Greg Lacey:

That's great. Through all this, there are implications for principals in schools. We often have principals get called instructional leaders, and look, from my own story, I haven't been in a classroom since 1994, so I do wonder, I know currency is very important for you and your facilitators, and I do wonder about how teachers see my currency as an instructional leader as a principal. I've been in the game for about 24 years now, and it's a long time since I've been in a classroom, but what I think I do is build a culture for our middle leaders to be able to thrive. We've talked about that beforehand, haven't we? About the culture that you build in a school to empower our middle leaders. Can you talk to us about that? What is it that principals need to become and be and know to help middle leaders thrive and really drive the improvement that we want in schools?

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, I might kick it off and then I'll throw over to Glenn, because I think from my point of view, I was a principal as well, Greg, and I think about this regularly because I think instructional leadership, that ability to be in a classroom and to lead from the front, and I've always said it is super important to understand the art and science of teaching always, that's super important. But when we think about a principal's role in the enablement role of how do they support their teachers and middle level leaders, particularly in this circumstance, how do they create that environment? We see very much that their role is about how do you set an inspiring, targeted vision and those goals, those tangible, big audacious goals that make me go, "Wow, we're going to get there in five years," and get people to see themselves in those goals through that authorship, through that ownership? Because as we know, the biggest change that's going to happen is that groundswell in those middle level leaders and the teachers creating the change on the ground.

So it really is, for mine as a principal, how do I create that culture that enables people to take both authorship and ownership of that big journey that we're going on? How do we get there? Where are we going? But not micromanaging that, enabling people, utilizing the collective genius to sort of lean in and say, "I've got this. Thank you very much. Give me the tools, give me the practical skills to get that done, and I will build it with you and it will come," because it is the only way that we can actually get true effective change to happen. We think, from our point of view that is certainly, if you take a big sort of bird's eye view of what the principal's role is, for us that is an incredible part of the role. If a principal does that well, they really do. We go into literally hundreds of schools a year that we work with across the different things, and where we see it really humming from the principal's point of view is where they're doing that.

Glenn Solomons:

If I reflect on my experiences as a middle level leader, when it's been I I feel like I'm having an impact, where that vision has been really clear, I feel like I've been a part of the authorship of that and that I've also got really direct responsibility for an area as well. That I work alongside my principal on this strategic direction that we're going on, not being fed jobs to do that align to it, is really, really important. So having really clear expectations almost between all different levels of the school, because that middle leader role will be different from one school to the next. It's important that everyone understands what the principal's position is, because principal's job can vary depending on the size of the school, and same with middle leadership.

So once everyone really understands what their role and responsibility is in school, and that's really clear, that's a huge hurdle to get through sometimes, especially if it's a new person setting into new role, but it is really important for them to understand that, okay, I'm leading this initiative and my principal's working alongside me. I can reach out for help if I need. But it's that trust, and that's where the mentoring really can come in, because you could say, "I'm stuck," go to your principal and go, "This is the strategic direction, it's on numeracy, and I've hit a bit of a wall." Then I can go back to my principal and ask as well. But sometimes it is authentically letting people lead and that true distributive leadership model that makes those that change really successful. Then that's where people see middle leadership as a really successful part, not the person literally stuck in the middle and is the conveyor of all the messages between a principal and the teaching staff, I think that's a really important part.

Greg Lacey:

It's a really big conversation around trust in schools because we hear about consistency from one classroom to another, and at our school we've had vast conversations about where we need to be consistent and where we need to allow professionals to make judgements about what goes on in the classroom. There's a level of trust in there to say, You are professionals and I trust you to go to your classroom and do the very best job you can every day," but there's a level of accountability around the things. We talk about the floor, that everyone needs to reach the floor, but we're not going to put rules in place to stop you reaching the ceiling.

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, I love that. I think it's absolutely key, is actually how do we provide that consistent message? Again, that enabling environment that the senior leadership team and the principal is able in a large school to go, "Okay, this is the consistency we need as a group. These are our agreed things. This is what we are agreed on, we are all about this," and so that we always... We can have those discussions behind closed doors. We have a clear value at EC, which is like, we are frank and then we rally. So you can have those discussions, but it's like, if we have agreed on something that this is what we're going to do, this is the consistency, as you mentioned it, this is the floor, this is where we're going.

So we build that with our leaders and say, as a middle level leader, it is important for you to understand united leadership and working together as a team, and when is the time to challenge and when is the time to make sure that you've agreed. You should have protocols in place as a school leader that says, "I want you to challenge me. I want you to pull it apart so we can make this the best idea possible." But you also have to learn as a middle level leader, okay, when we've made that decision we're going for something together, that you're a united front and that you're moving towards. That's a difficult lesson to learn sometimes, this goes back to that personal and professional level of skill that you need to have, that you'll develop and you'll make mistakes in as you go along the way as a middle level leader quite often.

Greg Lacey:

It brings about a bit of a conversation about perhaps the most complex leadership role for middle leaders is leading up.

Dave Faulkner:

Absolutely.

Greg Lacey:

What are your comments about leading up? What are your thoughts about that?

Glenn Solomons:

Leading up can be hard.

Dave Faulkner:

I'll get some tips from Glenn [inaudible 00:30:52] he's doing to me right now. Go for it, Glenn.

Glenn Solomons:

I think when I talk to middle level leaders, and in my own experience in schools, leading up is I think about alignment. If I feel like there's something that we need to be doing in our school, I don't go off and just do it in my team and then we're just this amazing team working on the side of the school. It's talking about, well, maybe we should do this as a part of our strategic plan. I would have that conversation with my principal.

Alignment is huge. I think that's making sure that there's trust between that middle leadership and that principal, as well. I've worked in schools where that relationship has been broken and then that dissent goes throughout a school very, very quickly. So alignment, making sure everyone's on the same page, but you also, as the principal, as the head of a school, there needs to be that trust to, as Dave said, pull something apart or question something as well. That's a part of leading up, but I think alignment is the key thing. Okay, what are we working on in a wider school context that I can do in my team, is a huge part as well.

Dave Faulkner:

I think from our point of view, when we think about the programs we run and co-create with the Academy here, both in Impact and Create, we talk about having practical skills to be able to have those conversations so that you keep your relationship intact. How do you convincingly pitch an idea that is well-aligned to a school's vision and direction rather than just be good at selling it but it not be aligned? So finding those points of practical application to have difficult conversations, to have convincing conversations, to be able to time your conversations, because it's not always the best time to try and get an idea across. All of those skills are part of that leading up, managing both the time, the alignment, and having the skill to practice that and try those conversations, which are not always easy for middle level leaders initially.

They might feel a little bit worried about taking that to them, but hopefully that goes back to that sort of principal environment of creating the conditions that enable people to come and bring ideas that are aligned and teach people about the balance between, what Glenn's talking about, alignment and autonomy. You've got to have some autonomy, but you've got to have some alignment. Maybe it goes back to that base and ceiling. You've got to be aligned, and that's the base of it, and then that autonomy to be creative and come up with fresh, new ideas that still keep us all on track to achieving our goals as a school.

Greg Lacey:

It kind of connects me to some of the work that I've been doing at the academy. What I've loved about the Academy is that they have principals in residents who bring real currency and relevance to the conversations about what's really going on in schools to keep it real. Is that a message you think principals need to hear as well from their middle leaders and their staff?

Glenn Solomons:

Definitely, I think it is an important part of the process, is to have that authentic voice from yourselves and the principals in residence. But it is really important for us to consider that if we do not want a middle leader to come up with, "Oh, I'm going to lead this initiative, go back to my school," and then the principal go, "That has nothing to do with our AIP." Again, that throws away from the alignment thing. So one of the key parts is getting an emerging leader to think about what is an AIP? What does that actually look like as well? So having that principal in residence part there as well, but it also solidifies that this is a journey they might be on when they're leading a school one day as well. So it's an important exposure, definitely.

Dave Faulkner:

Yeah, I love the opportunity to do some of our program design in the Academy with principals in residence, master teachers, because from us as well, that gives us insights into, well, what's needing to happen on a day-to-day basis right now in a school? How do we set our emerging leaders, our middle level leaders, up for success? Because as Glenn mentioned, if they need to be understanding different parts and policies and procedures that are happening, it helps us to align the skillset and the knowledge that we're giving in that creation to relevant things that they'll go back into their school on the next Tuesday afternoon and they'll be relevant for this year, not relevant five years ago. Because that's why I think program design and learning design, it's so important that it's about how do we teach the skills and processes, but we continually make sure that the content is updated and relevant to the context that people are in.

Greg Lacey:

Vivian Robinson will be jumping for joy right at the moment. She created our leadership framework and her capabilities around using relevant knowledge to solve complex problems while building relational trust is a real challenge for our middle leaders. We could continue with this conversation all afternoon, I'm sure, but we need to wrap it up for a little while. Do you have any closing comments about middle leaders? You've talked about the, I think they're just the engine room of change in schools. Can you tell us a little bit about just final comments about middle leadership in schools?

Glenn Solomons:

I think, I'll nerd out a bit here, but some of the research that I've been reading more recently that's been coming out is more focused on the impact that middle leaders can have in implementing change in schools. While principals are really, really important, they're in charge of that climate control, almost like a message, a call-out to principals, is to really trust your middle leaders. Create the plans, let them develop the plans with you to school improvement. You're only just setting up more middle leaders to become hopefully principals one day and lead schools. So that important relationship between the principal and the middle leaders is really, really important, and I'd implore principals to build that trust and trust them to really drive that change in schools.

Greg Lacey:

Great, thank you. I worked with Russell Qualia for a while and my favorite piece from him is around student agency. There's no student agency unless there's teacher agency, but he also steps it up and says there's no teacher agency with our principal agency, so great work. Thanks very much for your time this afternoon, really appreciate you taking the time to join us here at the Academy. We hope you enjoyed this podcast episode and learned something new about the complex and important work of middle leaders and the professional learning open to them at the Academy. Thanks so much, Dave and Glenn, for your time today.

Outro:

We hope you enjoyed this Academy podcast episode. You can find out more about our upcoming professional learning opportunities at academy.vic.gov.au and follow us on social media to stay up to date.