

# LEADERSHIP LENS

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*This  
month's  
interview*

JASON  
CANIGLIA  
MATER DEI  
COLLEGE  
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# JOURNEY TO EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

“I would much rather be someone known for high trust than high performance without trust.”

**J**ason Caniglia’s journey to educational leadership is a story of resilience, humility, and a dedication to helping others flourish.

His path, shaped by both successes and setbacks, is marked by his commitment to servant leadership—a philosophy that prioritises the growth and well-being of those he leads. As the current Deputy Principal of Mater Dei College in Perth, Jason’s leadership style is deeply influenced by his personal experiences, values, and a strong sense of purpose. His approach to leadership is built on a foundation of trust, empathy, and continuous learning, which are the pillars of his personal mission statement.

This mission statement has been built and fostered over a decorated education and professional career in prominent school based leadership roles such as Head of Year, Director of Sport & Student Leadership, Director of Co-curricular and Head of Boys’ Boarding. Jason’s leadership journey began with a pivotal moment in his youth.

As a talented athlete with a promising Australian Football League (AFL) career, he was on the verge of taking his passion for the sport to the professional level. However, a devastating injury changed the course of his life. ‘I ruptured both my adductors, and it was career over,’ Jason recalls. ‘I had put all my eggs in one basket, planning to play AFL.’

It was a tough blow, but it forced me to re-evaluate my path.’

This unexpected turn of events was instrumental in shaping Jason’s leadership philosophy. It was a mentor’s compassionate support during this challenging time that left a lasting impression on him. ‘One of my mentors put his arm around me and said, “You’ll be okay. This wasn’t your journey,”’ he reflects. ‘That moment helped me understand the importance of empathetic leadership and staying grounded during tough times.’ This experience sowed the seeds for Jason’s future career in education, where he would later integrate these values into his leadership approach.

## **A Mission Statement for Leadership.**

Jason’s leadership mission is simple yet profound: to create environments where others can flourish. His leadership style is built around four core pillars—values, continuous learning, character, and trust. ‘I would much rather be someone known for high trust than high performance without trust,’ he emphasises.

For Jason, trust is essential in leadership, as it allows for vulnerability, honest communication, and the ability to lead with integrity.

His commitment to personal development has driven him to constantly seek knowledge and wisdom from various sources. Jason is an avid learner, drawing inspiration from the work of thought leaders such as Stephen Covey and Brene Brown. ‘I believe in being clear and kind,’ Jason shares, reflecting on Brown’s teachings.



*‘It’s about giving feedback with compassion and always asking, “How can I help you?”’ This set of values and beliefs has been built over time from a combination of firsthand experience, mentorship and reflection, and targeted professional development.*

‘I’ve learned to be gentle with myself,’ he says. ‘I used to be highly critical, but now I remind myself that no one is perfect. We all make mistakes, and that’s part of the journey.’

**Overcoming Challenges and Learning from Setbacks.**

The path to leadership has not been without its challenges for Jason and like many middle leaders, he faced self-doubt and missed opportunities along the way. ‘Negativity bias can be tough,’ he admits. ‘There were times when I wondered if I’d hit my mark and should be content where I was.’ He also struggled with the interview process, feeling uncomfortable promoting himself, as he prefers to lead by example.

‘I’m quite humble and prefer to let my actions speak for themselves. Selling myself in interviews has never come naturally,’ he acknowledges. Despite these challenges, Jason remained committed to his mission and continued to refine his leadership skills. His ability to learn from both successes and failures has been crucial in helping him grow as a leader. ‘I’ve learned to be gentle with myself,’ he says. ‘I used to be highly critical, but now I remind myself that no one is perfect. We all make mistakes, and that’s part of the journey.’

**Advice to Middle Leaders.**

Know yourself and embrace growth. Jason believes that middle leadership roles are among the most challenging positions in a school, acting as a ‘conduit between the dance floor and the balcony.’ For those aspiring to advance in their careers, his advice is clear: ‘Get a strong sense of who you are as a person and what you want to achieve.’

This self-awareness, he argues, is the foundation for effective leadership and helps navigate the complexities of educational leadership.

Additionally, Jason encourages middle leaders to seek out learning opportunities and not be afraid to take risks. ‘Put your hand up for projects, even if you’re unsure,’ he advises.

‘You’ll make mistakes, but that’s how you grow. It’s part of being human.’ He also emphasises the importance of being an avid learner. ‘Learning doesn’t always have to be formal. It can happen through mentorship or observing others,’ he notes.

**The Importance of Balance and Family.**

Jason places a high priority on maintaining a healthy work-life balance, especially in the high-pressure environment of school leadership. ‘My family is the most important thing to me,’ he says.

He has developed strategies to ensure that his work does not encroach on his personal life.

The work of Dr Adam Fraser he credits for instilling the “third space” into his routine which is the time he dedicates to transitioning between work and home life. ‘In the morning, I go to the gym or take a walk by the beach. In the afternoon, I take a few laps around a park near my house to clear my mind before going home to my family.’

Jason is also firm about setting boundaries between work and home life, encouraging his staff to do the same. ‘Unless the school is burning down, it can wait,’ he says, firmly advocating against answering emails after hours. ‘As leaders, we need to set the example and protect our personal time.’



# “Learning doesn’t always have to be formal. It can happen through mentorship or observing others.”

## The Future of Education

A focus on authenticity and character is important. For Jason, the future of education is not just about academic success but also about developing well-rounded, empathetic individuals who can thrive in a complex world. ‘It’s about helping people flourish, and that’s what drives me every day,’ he concludes. Jason believes that education is at a pivotal moment, offering a ‘really good opportunity to change the way we educate’ by shifting the focus from strictly academics to a more values-based approach.

While literacy and numeracy remain essential, he sees a chance to align these with values education, which some schools already emphasise. He also highlights the growing influence of AI, acknowledging its potential to challenge traditional learning but also to engage students in new ways.

Jason stresses the importance of preparing students to be ‘collaborators, problem solvers, critical thinkers’ and, above all, ‘good people that are socially, emotionally intelligent.’ He also expresses concern about the future of school leadership, noting the need for proactive talent identification and urges schools to continue to build the capacity in their staff, nurture their wellbeing and encourage them to grow.

In Jason Caniglia’s journey, it is clear that leadership is not just about reaching the top - it is about guiding others, learning from setbacks, and remaining true to one’s values. Through his experiences and insights, Jason continues to inspire and lead with authenticity and compassion, helping to shape the future of education.

**What are you most proud of?**

**“Two things - most proud of my family.**

**They are the most important thing in my life and I am proud of the life that we have built and they come above all else. I am proud of the journey that I am on.**

**I have not had it easy - I have had my setbacks and knock backs and I have had to deal with adversity.**

**I hope that I can continue to get opportunities and continue to grow because I am a person who aspires to be a principal and I am proud of that. “**



**Jason Caniglia is the Deputy Principal at Mater Dei College in Perth WA.**

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