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this month's interview

CARLIE DEPPELER

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HILLS ADVENTIST NSW

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LEADING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY, BUILDING WITH TRUST.

"I learnt to stop worrying about things I couldn't change, and to really hone in on what I could influence."

Carlie Deppeler's leadership journey didn't begin with a clearly mapped-out plan. It wasn't fuelled by ambition or long-term aspiration.

It was ignited by a moment of recognition from someone who saw in her the potential to lead. "Someone told me they thought I could be a principal, long before I ever considered it myself," she recalls.

That unexpected encouragement was a turning point, planting the seed for a career that would go on to span two worlds: the private sector and education. Carlie now leads a faith-based school in Sydney, overseeing early learning through to Year 12.

Her leadership style is deeply shaped by her diverse experiences particularly her time working in industry and grounded in her unwavering belief in values, relationships, and community.

Her journey has been far from traditional, but her impact is undeniable.

From Industry to Education: Lessons That Last

Carlie first trained as a teacher but stepped away from the profession early on to work in the food industry, where she spent eight years in a fast-paced commercial environment.

When she eventually returned to teaching for family reasons, she rediscovered the joy that had drawn her to education in the first place. "I never left the classroom because I didn't enjoy it," she reflects. "Coming back reminded me of what I loved."

Unlike many school leaders who rise through the ranks solely within education, Carlie's time in industry profoundly shaped her leadership approach. "I learned how to listen, how to use feedback constructively, and how to stay focused on what I could influence - not the things I couldn't change," she explains.

These lessons would prove critical as she stepped into school leadership during one of the most uncertain times in recent history.

Finding Joy and Staying Grounded

Despite being a secondary-trained teacher, Carlie has found unexpected joy in the early years setting. On particularly difficult days, she finds comfort and perspective in the simplest of moments.

"Sometimes, when things feel overwhelming, I walk into our early learning centre and one of the little ones will roar at me like a dinosaur and I roar back. It's such a good reminder of why we do what we do."

It's this sense of joy and groundedness that helps her stay balanced amid the pressures of leadership. The role comes with emotional weight, the kind that isn't listed in job descriptions. "You'd be surprised by how much people share with you - students, families, staff. The emotional burden of what you're trusted with can be immense," she admits. "It's something I had to learn to manage."

Leading in Times of Uncertainty

Carlie stepped into the principalship in January 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to unfold. "There were things I didn't do as a principal until 2023," she explains.

"Some people think leadership is about the leader doing everything. I believe the wisdom is in the room ."

“My job isn’t to make the difference in the classroom - it’s to create the space where teachers can.”

“Those early years were about navigating the unknown, supporting staff and families through crisis, and building trust in real time.”
What emerged from that period wasn’t just resilience - it was a deep connection between Carlie and her school community. “My team didn’t know how I would lead. I was brand new. But they trusted me anyway. That trust allowed us to make it through together.”

Feedback, Autonomy and Support

Carlie’s commitment to feedback as a tool for growth is a direct carryover from her time in industry. “I’m not afraid of feedback, I welcome it. You have to sift through it, but it offers insights you can’t get anywhere else.” This belief informs how she supports teachers, particularly those at the beginning of their careers.

She recalls her own early experience: being the only teacher in her subject area at a school, with no oversight or structured support. “No one checked in. I could have been doing the wrong thing and no one would have known,” she says. “That experience taught me the value of independence, but also how critical it is to have someone to mentor and guide you.” Now, she strives to create that balance for new teachers: offering them autonomy to explore their craft while ensuring they’re supported and not left feeling isolated. “It’s about giving people the space to grow, but also being there to check in, to catch them if they’re struggling.”

Hiring for Passion and Purpose

When it comes to recruitment, Carlie looks beyond philosophy statements and credentials. One of her go-to interview questions is: Tell me about your most interesting lesson. “That question tells me everything I need to know,” she says. “What they find interesting, how they think students learn best, how creative they are, and what kind of energy they bring to the classroom.”

She’s not just looking for technical skill - she’s seeking educators who are passionate, imaginative, and deeply connected to their ‘why.’ “You can see their eyes light up when they talk about a lesson that worked. That spark tells me more than any resume ever could.”

Leadership Visibility: Showing Up Where It Counts

Carlie believes that presence is one of the most important and underrated aspects of school leadership. “Sometimes, people get nervous when the principal shows up. But if you’re visible regularly, it normalises it. It shows that you care, that you’re invested.”

Her approach is adaptive and situational. During a particularly difficult period, when her school lost a staff member, she knew instinctively where she needed to be. “That team needed me, to listen, to support, to help them process it. That was more important than being seen elsewhere at that time.” For Carlie, relational leadership isn’t just about being available - it’s about being intentional with your presence.

Creating the Conditions for Others to Thrive

Carlie is clear that her role isn’t to be the star of the show. “My job is to create an environment where others thrive. Sometimes that means I’m in the background smiling, waving, making the speech while the real work is happening around me.”

As a person of faith, she sees her leadership through the lens of servant leadership. “I try to walk alongside my team. I ask, ‘What do you need to fly?’ I don’t have all the answers, but I do believe the wisdom is in the room. My job is to keep the plates spinning so those ideas can take flight.”

Faith-Based Education: A Values-Driven Future

Despite Australia’s increasing secularism, Carlie remains deeply committed to the role of faith in education. “There’s still a strong desire in the community for children to be raised with values with an understanding of something greater than themselves,” she explains.

"My role is to keep the plates spinning so the great ideas from others can come to life. "

"I came from industry, where it was all about profits and outcomes. In education, it's about people and that's what drives me."

For Carlie, this purpose shapes everything from strategic planning to daily interactions. "We're not just preparing students for tests or careers. We're helping shape who they are and how they move through the world."

Leading with Vision, Not Just Direction

Over the years, Carlie has come to recognise that effective leadership is not about issuing instructions, it's about building shared vision. "I used to think leadership meant I had to make all the changes," she reflects. "But I've learnt that real change happens when we work towards something together." For Carlie, that means ensuring every team member feels ownership over the school's direction, not just compliance with decisions.

She views her role as a facilitator rather than a commander, the one who ensures there's clarity around goals, space for ideas to flourish, and momentum to bring those ideas to life.

"People sometimes expect the leader to have all the answers," she says. "But I believe the answers are already in the room, my job is to help draw them out and keep everyone moving forward together."

Growth Through Challenge

Carlie doesn't shy away from acknowledging the personal transformation that leadership has demanded of her. "There's a lot I'm proud of but one of the biggest things is my own growth," she says. Taking on principalship during a global pandemic meant learning on the run, adapting without precedent, and leading with vulnerability.

"There were things I simply hadn't done before. But each challenge helped me become more grounded, more aware, and more capable."

She credits those early years with building not just professional confidence, but a deeper understanding of the kind of leader she wants to be, one who is calm in crisis, open to feedback, and deeply human in how she shows up.

What are you most proud of?

I took on the role of principal in January 2020, not fully understanding what the job would demand -and then COVID hit. Right from the start, everything was unpredictable. There were entire aspects of my role that I didn't experience until 2023 because the first few years were dominated by crisis management and constant change.

What I'm most proud of is how we navigated those early years together. My team didn't know how I was going to lead - and truthfully, neither did I at times - but they trusted me anyway.

That trust, built during the most uncertain period of our professional lives, has been the foundation for everything we've achieved since. It's what allowed us to face further challenges with confidence, compassion, and unity.

To have been able to establish that level of trust so early, and to see it carry us forward, is something I will always hold close. That's what I'm most proud of.

Carlie Deppeler is the Principal of Hills Adventist College, NSW.