

The following is a blog written by Nikiesha Stevenson from Toogoolawah State High School in Queensland, Australia.

Leadership is Influence, Not Title

I remember sitting in a meeting, surrounded by people who spoke in acronyms, buzzwords, and perfectly rehearsed phrases. I stayed quiet, shrinking into my chair, convinced I didn't belong.

I'm not a leader, I told myself. I don't have the title, the pay, or the authority.

At the time, I thought leadership was something handed to you with a nameplate and a position description. Without those, I believed I was just another teacher doing my job.

What I didn't realise was that I was already leading. I was influencing outcomes, shaping culture, and making decisions that impacted people — I just didn't call it "leadership" because it didn't fit the image I had in my head.

My Imposter Syndrome

For years, I held myself back because I didn't think I had the "right" to lead. I avoided anything that looked like leadership, especially in formal settings. I'd sit in rooms where meta-language and department jargon dominated the conversation, and I'd feel like an outsider.

It felt like leadership belonged to a different group — the ones with the titles, with the pay, and the office. I thought my role was to follow, not to lead.

Meanwhile, I was leading without realising it. I was creating opportunities for students that didn't exist before. I was mentoring colleagues. I was advocating for changes in the Arts curriculum that better reflected our learners' needs. I was collaborating across departments to make things happen that no single person could achieve alone.

But because there was no formal title attached to my work, I dismissed it as "just doing my job." Imposter syndrome can make you blind to your own influence.

Imposter Syndrome

A persistent feeling of self-doubt and inadequacy despite evident success. People with imposter syndrome often believe they've fooled others into thinking they're more capable than they truly are, attributing achievements to luck rather than skill.

The Panel That Changed My Thinking

One of the most defining moments came when I was invited to join a panel discussion with The Learner First and the Contributive Learning framework for learning design that I had only recently encountered. My role was to share what it looked like in my classroom.

Contributive Learning

Contributive Learning is an approach to education that empowers learners to use their knowledge, skills, and self-awareness to make meaningful contributions to themselves, others, and the world. It goes beyond academic success, focusing on personal growth, connection, and purposeful impact—helping individuals shape futures that matter to them.

Almost instantly, my imposter syndrome took over. How could I possibly sit alongside a room full of seasoned leaders and speak with authority on something I had barely begun to explore?

When the day arrived, I found myself seated next to panellists who spoke with effortless confidence, weaving in leadership jargon, strategic frameworks, and policy references as if they were second nature. In contrast, I felt small. My heart pounded, and the voice in my head kept repeating, “you don’t belong here”.

When it was my turn, I spoke as honestly as I could. I can barely recall the specifics — it felt like I was operating on autopilot — but I know I wasn’t trying to sound impressive; I was simply trying to keep up. When the audience began asking questions laden with complex terminology I didn’t fully understand, I made the choice to be transparent and ask for clarification. My answers were direct, uncomplicated, and rooted in the lived realities of my classroom.

As I left the stage, I was convinced I had failed to meet the moment.

But afterwards, the colleague who had invited me sought me out. She told me that when I spoke, the room went quiet — people leaned in. She said that when I talked about my students, I held their attention and touched their hearts. She praised me for cutting through the noise, for being relatable, and for reminding everyone in the room why our work matters.

I was stunned. The very thing I had assumed would undermine my credibility — my lack of jargon and my reliance on plain, human language — had been my greatest asset. It connected. It resonated. And it reminded me that **leadership is not about sounding important, but about making an impact.**

The Problem with Jargon

That panel taught me something important: sometimes the very thing you think disqualifies you from leadership is the thing that makes you effective as a leader.

Leadership conversations can be full of abstract terms and complex frameworks that they lose touch with the human side of the work. When language doesn't connect, it excludes. And when it excludes, it makes people doubt whether they belong in the conversation at all.

I realised leadership isn't about sounding impressive. It's about being understood. It's about speaking in a way that makes people lean in — not tune out.

Influence Over Title

The turning point came when I stopped measuring leadership by the size of someone's title and started recognising the depth of their influence.

These days, I measure leadership not by rank, but by influence.

You lead every time you **share an idea** that shifts someone's perspective.

You lead every time you **stand up for what's right**, even when it's hard.

You lead every time you **invest in someone** else's growth and see them succeed.

You lead every time you **create space** for voices that are often overlooked.

You lead every time you **admit you don't know** and invite others to help find the answer.

You lead every time you **encourage someone** to take a risk and back them when they do.

You lead every time you **celebrate** someone else's success without needing the credit.

You lead every time you **listen deeply** and make someone feel heard.

You lead every time you **turn a mistake into a learning opportunity**.

A title might give authority, but it's influence that builds trust. It's influence that sparks change. And it's influence that leaves a lasting impact — long after the meeting ends or the policy changes.

What Changed for Me

When I let go of the idea that I had to wait for a title, I started showing up differently.

I stopped worrying about whether my language sounded “professional enough” and started speaking in ways that were authentic, human, and relatable. I stopped waiting for permission to act on ideas and began implementing them. **I started seeing leadership opportunities everywhere — not because my role changed, but because my mindset did.**



And something interesting happened: people noticed. Colleagues began asking for my advice. Students looked to me for guidance beyond the classroom. I was invited into conversations and projects I never would have considered myself “qualified” for before.

I didn't need a title to lead. I just needed to recognise that I already was.

Why Imposter Syndrome Can Make You a Better Leader

“It creates a kind of quiet vigilance — a drive to prove yourself through actions, not just words”.

I've also come to believe that people with imposter syndrome often make some of the best leaders. That constant self-questioning, while uncomfortable, keeps you humble. It pushes you to listen more than you speak, to seek out other perspectives, and to prepare thoroughly because you never assume you already have all the answers. It creates a kind of quiet vigilance — a drive to prove yourself through actions, not just words. And because you know what it feels like to doubt your own worth, you're more likely to recognise and nurture the potential in others. In many ways, that humility, empathy, and willingness to learn are exactly what real leadership requires.

Redefining Leadership

Now, I see leadership as something everyone can practise. It's not a position on an org chart — it's a series of daily actions. It's how you show up, how you speak to people, and how you inspire them to take the next step forward.

If I could go back and tell my past self one thing, it would be this:



You don't have to wait for the title to start leading. You're already doing it. The only question is — will you own it?



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