



Leadership Lessons for the 21st Century

Fifty years of equipping leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that prepare children and youth for college, careers, and citizenship yields many lessons. IEL's broad network of leaders—superintendents, principals, policy leaders, academics, public officials, private funders and community-based practitioners—shared their lessons as a part of IEL's 50th anniversary celebration. Ten powerful lessons emerged from our review of their advice. We are grateful for their contribution.

1. Leaders are anchored in a commitment to equity and the pursuit of social justice. They mobilize partners and build collective will to ensure opportunities for all children and youth.
2. Leaders dream of a better world. They ground a shared vision in audacious possibility and practicality.
3. Leaders recognize that knowing how to lead change is as important as knowing the change one wants to achieve. They respect history, understand how people adapt, and focus on results. Leaders enable their teams and their community to see and pursue a clear path forward.
4. Leaders are committed to democracy and participatory approaches to change. By reaching across boundaries and fostering collaboration, they bring together resources from diverse people and organizations to help attain shared goals.
5. Leaders embrace and manage the tensions that are pervasive in their work and help others do the same. They balance the importance of building strong trusting relationships with demands for accountability and quick action, never overlooking one for the other.
6. Leaders are humble, yet relentless; tolerant, yet demanding; focused and analytical, yet creative systems-thinkers. They are unfailingly truthful, respectful, and ethical.
7. Leaders create a supportive and responsive culture—a culture of inclusion at all levels, a culture that helps individuals grow and learn, and a culture that embraces risk and learns from mistakes along the pathway to success. And, they know that “culture eats strategy for lunch.”
8. Leaders are present. They are reflective. They take care of themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually, so they can be fully focused in the moment.
9. Leaders listen actively and learn from everyone. They learn from their peers, from people in their own field and others, and from people all across their community.
10. Leadership can emerge from anywhere and anyone. Leaders mentor and empower, knowing that many more strong leaders are needed to enable all children and youth to succeed.