

HOLDING STEADY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Leading with kindness, humility and humour

BRENT BLOFFWITCH • REBECCA BOLTON

This session includes discussion of:

- Public criticism
- Workplace pressure
- Threats and disrespectful behaviour
- The emotional impact of leadership scrutiny

OUR PURPOSE

We hope you leave with:

- Clarity about your leadership values
- Language for leading under pressure
- Practices that protect culture and trust
- Confidence that steadiness matters

Choose one person or character from each:

A fictional character

A person you admire

Someone you would want beside you in a crisis

90 SECONDS

Why did you choose them?

Write the qualities — not the achievements.

Then circle three qualities you would want others to experience in your leadership.

2 MINUTES

*The spotlight does not create character.
It reveals it.*

The job has changed.

School leadership now occurs in:

- **Real time**
- **Public view**
- **Permanent record**

The gap between incident and public judgement has almost disappeared.

The school day ends.
The leadership role often does not.

- Social media
- Evening messages and weekend developments
- Online parent groups
- The pressure to respond before facts are known

A FALSE EXPECTATION

*Visible leadership
is often mistaken for
perfect leadership.*

- Know everything immediately
- Prevent every incident
- Respond without emotion
- Never make an error

When the story breaks, the audience includes:

Students

Staff

Families

Future employees

Other schools

Your own family

You

General Community

THE EVIDENCE

This is not an isolated experience.

SASPA Media Study

- Heightened media attention
- Reputational pressure
- Blurred professional boundaries
- Emotional and psychological strain
- Uncertainty about available support

South Australian Secondary School Leaders' Experiences of Negative Media Coverage

Research Report
May 2025



SASPA

South Australian
Secondary Principals'
Association



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Education Futures



You are expected to be visible.
But visibility creates vulnerability.

Teacher cleared by investigation after verbal and speak

P 'Bullied, threatened and assaulted': Claims of

N W 'You should just end your life': Teen relentlessly

The Va ta Principal of troubled Nuriootpa High School in

th Videos of student fights at southern Adelaide high

bu sc A former Nuriootpa High School student has fled

a Former teacher opens up about culture at Barossa

q H 'It's the worst thing they can say': Teacher forced

to Mother of Nuriootpa High School student bashed

ru in Two fights, ambulance called in one day at

Nuriootpa High School in Barossa Valley

A notorious SA school was sent into lockdown following three separate incidents in one day, including a knife being
student's chest.



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What's going on at Nuriootpa High School?

Shashi Baltutis



What's going on at Nuriootpa High School?

A high school in the Barossa has been the subject of shocking... [more](#)

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HOW FAST IT MOVED

The speed of the storm



Once a narrative takes hold, every new event is interpreted as evidence that the narrative is true.

THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A journey through the spotlight

There were moments of shock, anger, protectiveness and self-doubt.
We wanted to correct inaccuracies and defend our staff and students.



SHOCK

It hits hard
and fast.



ANGER

The instinct
to react.



PROTECTIVENESS

Our people.
Our students.
Our community.



SELF-DOUBT

Questioning
ourselves when
the noise is loud.



THE RIGHT OF REPLY

Wanting a right
of reply and having
a useful right of reply
are not always the
same thing.

“Are we really a bad school?”

Most often, the answer was no.

Staff were asking:

- Are we safe?
- Are we supported?
- Does leadership understand?
- Will anyone defend us?
- Should I stay?

*The leadership team becomes
the adult in the room.*

- Stay connected
- Manage their own emotions
- Protect one another
- Present steadiness without pretending everything was fine

What silence can feel like

LEADERS

Powerlessness

STAFF

Uncertainty

FAMILIES

Avoidance

STUDENTS

Confirmation

HOLDING STEADY

KINDNESS

keeps us connected

HUMILITY

keeps us grounded

HUMOUR

keeps us human

KINDNESS

Not softness.

Not avoidance.

Not lowering expectations.

WHO RECEIVES KINDNESS?

- Staff under pressure
- Students who have made mistakes
- Families who are frightened or angry
- Community members telling their story
- Journalists doing their work
- Leaders themselves

Care without honesty is avoidance.
Honesty without care is cruelty.

HUMILITY

Strong enough to listen.

Secure enough to learn.

Honest enough to repair.

THE INSTINCT VS THE CHOICE

THE INSTINCT

- Correct
- Explain
- Defend
- Prove
- Win

VS

THE LEADERSHIP CHOICE

- Listen
- Clarify
- Own
- Repair
- Learn

Who is the response for — the school, or our own ego?

TWO EXPERIENCES

BREAKFAST CREEK

- A drink was spilled.
- The waiter owned the mistake.
- Apologised, resolved it generously.

VS

GETTING JETSTARRED

- A problem occurred.
- The customer met deflection.
- No clear ownership shown.

*Mistakes do not automatically destroy trust.
Deflection does.*

1

Notice it

2

Own it

3

Name the impact

4

Repair it

5

Learn from it

6

Move forward

TABLE ACTIVITY

**Think of a situation where you owned a mistake —
or avoided owning one.**

What happened to trust?

4 MINUTES • PAIRS

HUMOUR

A pressure valve, not an escape route.

- Releases tension
- Creates connection
- Protects morale
- Signals psychological safety
- Keeps people human

Humour becomes harmful when it:

- Minimises pain
- Targets a person
- Avoids accountability
- Appears publicly flippant
- Excludes people
- Arrives too soon

*Did people experience leadership
the way we intended?*

Intent is not impact.

Staff reported high exposure to:

- Emotionally demanding situations
- Disrespectful behaviour
- Threats or aggression
- Difficult interpersonal interactions

Data removed.

THE SURPRISING FINDING

AND YET...

Perceptions of proactive wellbeing and leadership support improved.



Data removed.

*Donuts are appreciated.
Presence is remembered.*

- Check-ins
- Access to psychological support
- Relief and workload adjustments
- Visible leadership and personal contact
- Following up after incidents

Steadiness is contagious



Beyond Survival

Using scrutiny as a catalyst for organisational improvement

*When criticism arrives,
do not only look out.
Look in.*

- What part of this do we need to hear?
- What does the situation reveal?
- Where are our systems vulnerable?

*Behaviour was the entry point.
Culture was the work.*

- Values, Vision and Site Learning Plan
- Positive Behaviour for Learning
- Restorative practice
- Leadership alignment and community renewal
- New school branding

OUR LEGACY

Honouring our past



OUR TRADITIONAL VALUES



TRADITION



RELATIONSHIPS



EXCELLENCE

OUR FUTURE

Living our values every day



Nuriootpa High School

OUR VALUES FOR THE FUTURE



GROWTH

- We develop by being curious, reflective, and open to learning.
- We take responsibility and are accountable for our actions.
- We give our best effort, keep trying, and step up to challenges.



RESPECT

- We show kindness in our words, actions, and relationships.
- We are empathetic, compassionate, and value diversity.
- We support and look out for each other, treating others the way we would like to be treated.



RESILIENCE

- We are flexible and adapt to change.
- We persevere, show determination, and keep going even when it's hard.
- We learn from mistakes and take opportunities to improve.

Different foundations. Shared purpose. One community. *Always striving.*

*A reputation is what others say about you.
An identity is what you choose to live.*

*The job did not harden us.
It clarified us.*

WHAT WE LEARNED THE HARD WAY

- **Values** *not scripts*
- **Relationships** *not reactions*
- **Teams** *not heroes*
- **Repair** *not perfection*
- **Steadiness** *not performance*

Under pressure:

What do you hold onto?

What do you let go of?

Who helps you stay steady?

Based on your reflection this session – what's your motto?

2 MIN REFLECT · 3 MIN SHARE



*Schools do not need perfect leaders.
They need steady ones.*

*Kindness kept us connected.
Humility kept us grounded.
Humour kept us human.*

*Media storms pass.
School culture endures.*

HOLD STEADY.

Thank you

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