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The power of proportion: Observation, listening and speaking as core practices for educational leaders

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The power of proportion: Observation, listening, and speaking as core practices for educational leaders

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Abstract

Educational leadership requires balance between urgency and patience, speaking and silence, and action and reflection. Early in my career, I received enduring advice from a veteran leader: “You have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. You should observe, listen, and speak in proportion.” This guiding idea is widely attributed to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, whose teachings emphasize the importance of perception, disciplined attention, and intentional speech. This principle has guided my journey from substitute teacher to central office administrator and now as a professor and consultant. Drawing on the legacy of four generations of educators in my family, this article explores the power of proportionate leadership through three case studies. As principal of an elementary school, proportionate observation fostered trust and sustainable change. As a School Support Officer in an Independent School District, I provided proportionate listening and anchored leadership amid organisational instability. As a professor and consultant, proportionate speaking equips aspiring leaders to build trust and credibility. These narratives are situated within scholarship on reflective practice, trust, sustainable leadership, and multiplier leadership. The discussion emphasises implications for practice, leadership preparation, and policy, offering proportionate leadership as a framework for building trust, sustaining organisational health, and preparing leaders who act with wisdom and humility.

Keywords: *Proportionate leadership; reflective practice; sustainable leadership; capacity building; transformational leadership; adaptive leadership*

Introduction

Leadership wisdom is often transmitted through lived experience and the legacies of those who came before us. For me, the foundation of my career in education rests not only on my own professional journey but also on the influence of four generations of educators in my family. My great-grandfather founded and ran a business school where he taught women of colour to type, manage records, and develop bookkeeping skills so that they would have career options beyond domestic labour. Many of his students went on to secure professional roles in offices, charting new pathways for their families. My grandfather continued in this work, whilst my grandmother pursued higher education at the age of thirty-three, earning both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree before serving as a teacher in the Waco Independent School District for more than three decades. My paternal grandmother was a dedicated teaching assistant in special education, where she was known for her patience and skill. My mother was a bilingual educator who pioneered immersion programmes and taught multilevel classes entirely in Spanish. My father combined teaching and coaching, instructing students in history while also leading basketball, track, and football.

It was within this family tradition of teaching, mentoring, and opening doors for others that I found my own calling. My career began in the most humble of roles, first as a substitute teacher, then as a teaching assistant, and later as a front office clerk. These early positions offered me a ground-level view of how schools function and how every role, regardless of title, contributes to the success of students. From there, I became a classroom teacher at both the elementary and middle school levels, teaching across subjects and coaching track, soccer, and basketball. Each experience deepened my understanding of how children learn, how teachers persevere, and how schools create community.

Over time, I stepped into administration, first as an assistant principal and then as a principal. Later, I became a central office administrator responsible for supporting multiple campuses. This progression gave me the rare opportunity to lead across every level of K–12 education while drawing from the perspective of someone who had served in nearly

every school role. Today, as a professor of educational leadership and consultant, I continue that journey by preparing future leaders to enter schools with wisdom and humility.

Many readers will be familiar with the expanding list of adjectives used to describe leaders across the field. Transformational, adaptive, servant, ethical, and collaborative have become common descriptors, and the accumulation of these terms can sometimes create the sense that leadership discourse is saturated. In acknowledging this landscape, the intention here is not to add another descriptor, but to return to a principle that is both simple and evidence-based. The focus on proportion observing, listening, and speaking with intention reflects a practice grounded in lived experience and supported by a wide body of scholarship.

The thread running through this professional history is a piece of advice I received early in my administrative career. Sitting in a panel session as a new assistant principal, I listened as seasoned administrator Susan Borg offered a simple but profound reminder: “You have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. You should observe, listen, and speak proportionately.” This principle is widely attributed to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, whose teachings emphasize self-discipline, perception, and intentional speech. At first, the words seemed almost too simple. Over time, however, I discovered that they contained the very essence of effective leadership. Observation builds context and awareness. Listening develops trust and relationships. Speaking proportionately ensures that when leaders do speak, their words are measured, intentional, and credible.

This article draws on two sets of professional experiences: navigating significant organisational instability while serving as a School Support Officer in an Independent School District, and teaching and mentoring aspiring administrators as a professor and consultant. The periods of instability included shifts in district leadership, repeated reorganisation, and rapidly changing expectations for campus support, all of which shaped how observation, listening, and purposeful communication became essential practices. These experiences are presented in a reflective, analytic manner consistent with an autoethnographic approach, in which personal narrative is used to illuminate broader questions of leadership practice. The principle is grounded in reflective practice, relational trust, and purposeful communication. It draws from Schön’s (1983) work on reflection, Tschannen-Moran’s research on trust, and communication theory that emphasises listening before speaking (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). It also aligns with sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) and multiplier theory (Wiseman, 2010), which highlight pacing, voice, and the development of others. The cases are considered alongside scholarship on reflective practice, trust in schools, sustainable leadership, and capacity building. The goal is to illustrate how a single piece of wisdom, grounded in lived experience and supported by research, can serve as a compass for current and aspiring leaders.

Literature review

Educational leadership has long been described as complex work that requires balancing managerial responsibilities with relational judgement (Leithwood et al., 2020). While policies and accountability structures often emphasise technical skill, a substantial body of research highlights the importance of leaders who are reflective, trust-building, relationally responsive, and intentional in their communication (Schön, 1983; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). In this article, the idea of observing, listening, and speaking in proportion is not presented as another adjectival leadership category but as a deliberate strategy that can be enacted within and across established leadership approaches. This strategy aligns with key elements of transformational leadership in its attention to influence and credibility (Leithwood et al., 2020), with distributed leadership in its emphasis on shared responsibility (Harris & Spillane, 2008), with servant leadership in its grounding in listening and service (Greenleaf, 1977), and with relational and instructional leadership in its focus on trust, communication, and context (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hallinger, 2018). Positioning proportional practice as a strategy rather than a new leadership type helps avoid adding to the proliferation of descriptors in the field while still offering a clear analytic lens.

This framing also responds to gaps in the existing literature. Although research widely discusses reflection, trust, listening, and communication (Brownell, 2012; Schön, 1983, Tschannen-Moran, 2014), fewer studies address how leaders intentionally pace these behaviours, particularly in contexts marked by disruptive or extensive organisational

change. The conceptual gap concerns how these established practices function together as a coherent leadership strategy. The methodological gap is addressed through a reflective, autoethnographic approach that uses lived experience to illuminate leadership decision-making (Klenke, 2016). The practical gap centres on how leaders can enact proportional behaviours in real time to build credibility, strengthen relationships, and support organisational stability. The principle of observing, listening, and speaking in proportion resonates strongly with these themes.

Reflective practice and the discipline of observation

Observation as a deliberate act of leadership is grounded in the concept of reflective practice. Schön (1983) introduced the idea of the reflective practitioner, highlighting how professionals engage in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the ways professionals monitor and adjust decisions in real time, while reflection-on-action captures how they analyse past experiences to inform future actions. For educational leaders, both forms of reflection depend on careful observation. Entering new contexts without observing first risks misunderstanding culture, overlooking strengths, and implementing changes that may be misaligned.

Klenke (2016) reinforces this point in her work on qualitative research in leadership, emphasizing that observation is an essential means of understanding human dynamics in organisations. For aspiring administrators, cultivating habits of observation develops what Hallinger (2018) has described as “situational awareness” (p. 17), the ability to perceive and interpret the multiple layers of school culture and context. Observation, when treated as leadership practice rather than passive presence, creates a foundation for wise and context-sensitive decision-making.

Listening as the foundation of trust

Listening is frequently described as one of the most important yet underutilized leadership skills (Brownell, 2012). In the field of communication studies, Brownell (2012) identified listening as a disciplined process that includes hearing, understanding, interpreting, and responding. Applied to educational leadership, listening signals respect, values stakeholder perspectives, and lays the groundwork for authentic collaboration.

Trust, one of the most studied concepts in educational leadership, is closely linked to listening behaviours. Tschannen-Moran (2014) found that trust in schools emerges through leader behaviours that convey benevolence, honesty, competence, and reliability. Listening carefully to teachers, families, and students is central to each of these dimensions. Leaders who listen are perceived as more reliable because they base decisions on evidence rather than assumptions. In this context, listening provides evidence drawn directly from stakeholders’ experiences, concerns, and perspectives, allowing leaders to make decisions informed by the realities of school life rather than by inference or external pressure. They are also considered more benevolent and honest, since listening requires openness to voices beyond one’s own.

In practice, listening before speaking enhances credibility. Leaders who resist the impulse to talk first and instead prioritise listening cultivate what Bryk and Schneider (2002) termed “relational trust” (p. 42), the resource that undergirds school improvement. Their longitudinal work in Chicago schools demonstrated that schools with higher levels of relational trust were more likely to see academic improvement, while those with lower levels struggled despite technical reforms. In this context, listening is measurable because relational trust can be assessed through established survey instruments and school climate measures that capture staff perceptions of respect, reliability, and openness. Listening, then, is not a soft skill but a measurable determinant of improvement.

Speaking with purpose and sustainability

While observing and listening are foundational, leadership inevitably requires communication. The question is not whether leaders should speak, but how and when. Speaking proportionately emphasises purposeful communication, where words are strategic, timely, and aligned with organisational values.

Covey (2004) articulated this principle in his well-known habit, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” (p. 197). Leaders who listen before speaking are more likely to communicate with clarity and relevance because their words are grounded in understanding. Purposeful communication is also closely tied to sustainable leadership. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) argued that sustainable leaders do not rely on constant new initiatives or excessive rhetoric

but instead pace their communication to sustain long-term growth. Leaders who over-speak or speak without grounding risk exhausting staff and eroding trust. By contrast, leaders who speak proportionately reinforce stability and sustainability.

Multiplying capacity through proportionate leadership

Wiseman's (2010) work on multipliers and diminishers offers another lens for understanding proportionate leadership. Multipliers are leaders who amplify the intelligence and capability of those around them. They do this not by dominating conversations but by asking thoughtful questions, inviting contributions, and listening to responses. In contrast, diminishers stifle capacity by speaking too often, directing too tightly, and leaving little space for others. Speaking proportionately aligns with multiplier leadership by ensuring that a leader's words create space rather than consume it.

Leithwood et al. (2020) reinforce this idea in their review of school leadership research, identifying "building collaborative cultures" and "developing people" as core practices that improve schools. Both require communication that is proportionate and empowering. Leaders who observe, listen deeply, and then speak with purpose foster collaboration and build capacity in ways that technical directives alone cannot achieve.

Synthesis

The literature reviewed converges on a clear theme: leadership practice is strengthened when observation, listening, and purposeful communication are used in proportion. While observation can in part contribute to leaders' contextual awareness, it is not sufficient on its own; awareness also depends on access to data, opportunities for dialogue, and an understanding of organisational history and culture. Similarly, listening supports trust and collaboration, but its influence is shaped by the quality of relationships and the degree of psychological safety within a school. Speaking with purpose can build capacity, yet this outcome is not guaranteed. In contexts of crisis, conflict, or urgent safeguarding concerns, leaders may need to act or speak more decisively than proportional practice might initially suggest. These nuances indicate that proportional practice functions as a guiding strategy rather than a fixed formula. Its effectiveness depends on contextual conditions, including organisational stability, existing levels of trust, the complexity of the issue at hand, and the readiness of others to participate in shared decision-making. Together, these considerations position proportionality as a flexible framework that complements, rather than replaces, established leadership theories.

Case studies: Applying proportionate leadership in practice

When I became principal of an elementary school, I stepped into a community with a deep legacy. The founding principal had served for approximately thirty years, shaping the culture of the school and wider community. I learnt this history through district records, conversations with staff, and accounts from families who had experienced that long tenure. The leader who followed stayed only a short time, leaving staff and families longing for stability. I was the third principal in just a few years, and I knew the school needed steadiness, humility, and trust.

Susan Borg's advice guided me during that transition. In my first months, I was given enough time and encouragement by my supervisor to learn the context before launching new initiatives, which allowed me to be physically present on campus rather than immediately focusing on external demands. With two eyes and two ears, I committed to observing and listening before speaking. I attended classrooms not to evaluate but to learn. I walked the hallways and ate lunch with students in the cafeteria. I sat quietly in team meetings to hear how teachers collaborated. These acts of presence and attentiveness signalled to staff that I valued their perspectives and respected the school's history. Observation allowed me to see that the school already had strong instructional practice, particularly in literacy. The challenge was not a lack of skill but a lack of alignment and consistent support. By carefully observing and then listening to teachers, I identified gaps in shared planning time and professional development. Rather than introducing entirely new programmes, I supported structures that amplified what was already working. Together, we redesigned professional learning communities, created parent engagement opportunities, and strengthened collaboration across year levels.

The outcomes were visible. Over two years, reading outcomes improved across multiple year levels, with

substantial gains in standardised reading assessments and increases in the proportion of pupils reaching higher levels of performance. Attendance remained high, and discipline referrals declined, while qualitative feedback from staff indicated a more positive school culture and climate. Teachers reported that leadership decisions were rooted in respect and authentic understanding. Research reinforces that observation and reflection are essential for leaders entering new contexts (Hallinger, 2018; Schön, 1983). By observing first and speaking later, I built credibility and created conditions for sustainable change.

ISD: Listening through instability

When I accepted a position in the Independent School District, I was originally hired as a School Improvement Officer. By the next day, my title had changed to School Support Officer. This small shift was the first of many. Throughout my tenure, I reported to multiple superintendents, worked through repeated reorganisations, and supported an evolving portfolio of schools that ranged from affluent campuses to underserved neighbourhoods and specialist programmes. In such an unstable context, proportionate leadership became not just good practice but a survival strategy. Listening first anchored me when everything else was shifting. At the start of each new assignment, I met with principals and simply asked, “What do you need most from me?” Their responses varied. In more affluent schools, leaders often wanted advocacy for innovative programmes. In underserved schools, the priorities were staffing, safety, and morale. By listening carefully before proposing solutions, I could tailor my support to what mattered most in each school community.

One example stands out. A group of schools under my supervision had persistently low performance on state accountability measures, particularly in reading and mathematics. Staff felt discouraged by years of interventions that seemed disconnected from their realities. Instead of launching a new improvement plan, I listened to their frustrations and hopes. From these conversations, it became clear that literacy was the shared priority. Together, we designed a literacy-centred strategy that reflected their voices. This included focusing school improvement plans on literacy, aligning professional learning with identified needs, strengthening guided reading and small group instruction, and using assessment information more systematically to guide intervention.

The outcomes extended beyond test scores. Staff reported a clearer sense of collective focus, greater coherence across initiatives, and increased confidence in their ability to improve pupil outcomes over time. Because the plan originated from listening, it gained credibility and buy-in. This practice is consistent with research on adaptive leadership, which emphasises mobilising people to tackle complex challenges by drawing on their capacity to learn rather than imposing purely technical fixes (Heifetz et al., 2009). Listening allowed me to discern which problems were technical and which were adaptive. Technical problems, such as timetabling or staffing, required immediate solutions. Adaptive challenges, such as reshaping culture, required patience, dialogue, and shared ownership. The outcomes extended beyond performance data. Principals described me as a reliable partner during times of upheaval. Even when titles and reporting lines changed, my commitment to listening gave me credibility. Trust, as Tschannen-Moran (2014) argues, is sustained when leaders demonstrate reliability and benevolence. Listening first enabled me to maintain those qualities and to serve schools more effectively despite the turbulence of organisational change.

Higher Education and consulting: Teaching and paying it forward

Today, as a professor of educational leadership and an independent leadership consultant, I pay forward the principle of proportionate leadership. My role now is not only to practise leadership but to prepare the next generation of administrators who will guide schools and districts into the future. In my courses, I explicitly teach the principle of “two eyes, two ears, one mouth”. Students are often struck by the simplicity of the phrase, yet they quickly realise its depth. During internships and field experiences, they return with stories of how observation helped them understand culture before acting, how listening earned them the trust of staff, and how speaking proportionately gave their contributions greater weight. These reflections confirm what Wiseman (2010) calls the multiplier effect, where leaders amplify the intelligence of others by creating space for their voices. I also model proportionate leadership in the classroom. Rather than dominating the discussion, I create opportunities for students to speak, listen to one another, and reflect on what

they have observed in their schools. This practice develops habits they will carry into their administrative roles. As Leithwood et al. (2020) note, successful school leaders are those who build collaborative cultures and develop people. Teaching proportionate leadership prepares students to do just that.

In consulting work, I coach aspiring and practising administrators to embed observation and listening into their first weeks in new roles. One assistant principal I worked with shared how observing classrooms before making changes transformed staff perceptions. Teachers saw him as respectful and thoughtful, which increased trust and reduced anxiety about change. This outcome illustrates how proportionate leadership can have both immediate and longer-term impacts. Paying forward this principle is both personal and professional. It honours the wisdom I received early in my career and helps ensure that future leaders enter schools with humility, trustworthiness, and strategic voice.

Implications and discussion

The three cases presented illustrate how a single principle, observing, listening, and speaking in proportion, can guide leadership across diverse contexts. From navigating instability at the district level to preparing the next generation of administrators, proportionate leadership emerged as a consistent framework for building trust, sustaining momentum, and multiplying capacity. This section discusses the broader implications for practice, leadership preparation, and policy.

Implications for practice

For practising administrators, the power of proportion provides a way to self-regulate communication and leadership behaviours in environments where urgency often dominates. Educational leaders are frequently pressured to act quickly, solve problems visibly, and demonstrate authority. Yet the experiences described here suggest that credibility is not gained by speaking first but by discerning when to observe, when to listen, and when to speak. At an Elementary School, the practice of observation helped prevent premature decisions and honoured the existing culture. In an Independent School District, listening enabled differentiated support that was responsive to diverse school contexts. In higher education and consulting, speaking proportionately modelled humility and gave aspiring administrators practical tools for their own leadership journeys. For practitioners, adopting this framework means cultivating daily habits of proportion. For example, scheduling intentional observation time in classrooms signals value for instructional practice, while dedicating time to structured listening sessions demonstrates respect for staff voice. Speaking only after these practices increases the likelihood that leaders' words are informed, contextualised, and credible. The implication is that proportionate leadership operates as a proactive discipline rather than a purely reactive stance, while still allowing for moments when leaders must respond more decisively in urgent or high-risk situations.

Implications for leadership preparation

For leadership preparation programmes, proportionate leadership can be explicitly taught as a core competency. Too often, preparation emphasises technical knowledge of finance, policy, and law without equal attention to relational skills such as listening and purposeful communication or to the pacing of these behaviours. Aspiring administrators need support not only in what to do but also in how to sequence and balance observing, listening, and speaking across different contexts. Embedding proportionate leadership in preparation can be achieved through field-based experiences that require students to observe and reflect before intervening. For instance, during internships, aspiring administrators can be tasked with conducting classroom observations, gathering staff feedback, and only then designing improvement strategies. Reflection assignments can emphasise how observation and listening informed their eventual communication and decisions. The principle also aligns with research on leadership dispositions. Leithwood et al. (2020) identified developing people and building collaborative cultures as core practices that influence school success. Proportionate leadership operationalises these practices by emphasising attentiveness, humility, and intentional communication. Preparing leaders who internalise this framework can strengthen the pipeline of administrators entering schools with relational wisdom and a more measured approach to change.

Implications for policy and systems

At the systems level, the principle of proportion highlights the importance of organisational conditions that allow leaders

the time and space to observe and listen. Current accountability environments often demand immediate results and quick fixes, which can inadvertently discourage reflection and listening. Policies that create space for leaders to engage in authentic dialogue with staff and communities are more likely to support sustainable improvement. For example, district policies that prioritise listening tours for new leaders or require structured stakeholder engagement processes embed proportionate leadership into systemic practice. Similarly, mentoring programmes for new principals can reinforce the discipline of observing and listening before speaking, ensuring that leaders are supported in pacing their leadership. The implication for policymakers is that proportionate leadership should not be left to chance. Structures and expectations can be designed to ensure that leaders are rewarded not simply for the speed of their responses but for the depth of their listening and observation and the quality of their judgement.

Integration with scholarship

The cases described in this article confirm what scholars have long argued. Schön (1983) emphasised reflective practice as central to professional learning. Tschannen-Moran (2014) demonstrated that trust emerges when leaders listen and respond with openness. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) highlighted that sustainable leadership requires pacing and perspective. Wiseman (2010) showed that multipliers amplify others' intelligence by speaking less and listening more. Covey (2004) reminded leaders to seek first to understand. Together, these bodies of research converge with the lived experiences presented here. Proportionate leadership is positioned as a practical strategy grounded in established theory, with emerging potential as a more fully articulated scholarly framework. Further conceptual and empirical work is needed to elaborate its principles, examine its limitations, and test its application in a wider range of contexts. Nonetheless, the analysis offered here illustrates how theory and practice intersect meaningfully in the daily work of leaders.

Broader significance

Beyond individual schools or districts, proportionate leadership offers a lens for thinking about the kind of leaders education systems need. In an era of rapid change, shifting accountability systems, and increasing demands on schools, the temptation is to equate leadership with constant action and communication. Yet the evidence discussed in this article suggests that what schools need most are leaders who know when to pause, when to listen, and when to speak with precision. For future leaders, the significance is personal as well as professional. Learning to balance observation, listening, and speaking is not only about leadership effectiveness but also about sustainability. Leaders who feel compelled to speak constantly risk burnout and eroded trust. Leaders who practice proportion create space for reflection, renewal, and shared ownership, while also retaining the capacity to act decisively when circumstances demand it.

Conclusion

The journey from substitute teacher to professor of educational leadership has taught me that leadership is less about titles and more about proportion. The wisdom I received as a new administrator from Susan Borg to use two eyes, two ears, and one mouth in proportion has proven to be both timeless and transformative. Across every role I have held, from principal at an Elementary School to School Support Officer in an Independent School District, and now as a professor and consultant, proportionate leadership has served as my compass.

Observation has allowed me to see the school culture clearly before acting. Listening has created the trust necessary to implement meaningful change. Speaking with purpose has ensured that my words inspire rather than overwhelm. These practices are not sequential steps but interconnected disciplines that shape how leaders approach every challenge and opportunity.

The research reinforces what practice confirms. Reflective practice highlights the need for observation. Trust in schools is built through listening. Sustainable leadership requires patience and pacing. Multipliers amplify capacity by giving others a voice. Proportionate leadership is where these strands converge, offering leaders a way to anchor their daily actions in both scholarship and wisdom.

For aspiring leaders, the call is to practise proportion from the very beginning of their careers. Enter schools with

humility, observe, listen deeply, and speak with purpose. For leadership preparation programmes, the challenge is to embed proportionate leadership into the curriculum, ensuring that future administrators see these practices as central, not optional. For policymakers and systems, the responsibility is to create conditions that allow leaders to engage in proportionate practice rather than pushing them toward quick fixes.

As a fourth-generation educator, I see proportionate leadership not only as a professional framework but also as a legacy. It honours the work of my grandparents, parents, and mentors, and it prepares the next generation to lead schools with wisdom and humanity. At its heart, the power of proportion reminds us that leadership begins not with speaking, but with seeing and listening.

AI declaration

In preparing this manuscript I used two AI tools, Grammarly and ChatGPT. I used Grammarly to check and correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and minor wording. I used ChatGPT only for wording suggestions and editing on sentences and paragraphs that I had already drafted and to check the clarity and flow of my expression. I reviewed every suggestion myself and accepted or declined changes as needed. I did not use AI tools to generate ideas, theoretical framing, analysis, or conclusions. All core intellectual content in the paper originates from my own scholarly reasoning and reflection.

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