

# The Solution

# 2

*“The mastermind has provided me with the most effective, long-lasting, and deep personal improvement I have ever encountered.”*

–Chris Jones, member of the “Guiding Principals” mastermind cohort

## Mastermind Snapshot

A former wrestler with a magnificent beard, Chris Jones is a strong leader in both build and mindset. He is a principal at a large high school in Massachusetts and has been a member of the “Guiding Principals” mastermind cohort since 2017. We have presented together at national conferences, and I am indebted to Chris’s championing of our leadership community over the years. I asked him to write about his experience within the mastermind and here is what he had to say:

*“What I have been able to accomplish thanks to the mastermind is too far-reaching for an easy description. I became a member of the mastermind shortly after I had accepted a position as a high school principal. I had always searched out professional development to assist with my urge to continually improve, but up until this point I felt as if everywhere I turned for help was focused on shallow and short-term gains. It was while I sat and watched various presenters at the NASSP national conference that I decided I didn’t want to just develop myself. I wanted to be*

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*a leader who could develop others and who could have people look to me for help. I didn't know how that was going to occur, but I knew one thing; I needed to change how I was approaching leadership altogether if I was to accomplish what I hoped. After meeting and speaking with Danny, I had a feeling the mastermind was a place to start this transformation.*

*My transformation started with a relatively disorganized, unfocused individual who, while having a deep desire to continually improve, lacked the vision and deeper understanding of leadership to make it happen. While it is not complete (true transformations never really are) I find myself in a place where I am not just staring at ever greater accomplishments, but in possession of the people and tools that will help me get there.*

*My membership in the mastermind has provided me with the most effective, long-lasting, and deep personal improvement I have ever encountered. There are many ways I've grown, but three key areas that I have noticed the most change in are productivity, servant-leadership, and vision.*

*It has improved my productivity and organizational skills. I now practice a morning ritual every morning that gets me prepared for the day. I have created an ideal week that allows me, as some of my teachers have put it, 'to get more done than they could imagine.' I now get into classes and provide feedback every day while continuing to have consistent communication with the community. I read books outside of education and focus on different levels of those I serve as a leader.*

*The mastermind has fostered a perspective of serving others by providing support and resources. I am a self-proclaimed (and practicing) 'teacher-centered principal' because I know that the best way to serve the most students is by leveraging the ability of teachers to serve them. The mastermind has taught me to be a more engaging and authentic leader so that I am able to motivate staff through this lens.*

*All of these things that I have gained from the mastermind would mean less than they do without a vision to carry my work forward. With the focus on sustainable improvements through purposeful planning, I continuously work with my building leadership team on identifying and attaining long-range goals based on core values. I am now driven by decision-making connected to our larger 'why.' This has been successful because of what the mastermind has taught me concerning productivity, decision-making, and reflection. The mastermind is what every leader who is serious about making a lasting impact needs; the opportunity to be part of a supportive group of innovative leaders who question the norm, push each other to be better for others, and offer support throughout the journey of wins and losses.*

*If one is looking for tangible results of the mastermind, I have those as well. I now regularly present at state-level conferences and have presented at three national conferences. I have been on multiple podcasts (stemming from my first Better Leaders Better Schools appearance) and am in the midst of authoring a book. I serve on multiple state association committees and have created numerous creative, long-lasting school programs to increase all students' success. I continue to foster the creation of other leaders in my organization. I have improved as a person because the mastermind is not about a singular focus on leadership. It is about developing individuals as a whole so they can become better leaders" (Jones, personal communication, October 27, 2020).*

Chris has experienced tremendous transformation and growth in the mastermind. That type of development is the promise we make to each and every member. In this chapter, you'll learn a little more about what the mastermind looks like from a high level, and through Part II of this book, we'll dig into specifically what makes it a powerful professional development experience. Now that we've looked at Chris's story, let's take a look at mastermind members as a whole.

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## Our Community

The mastermind currently has 60 members, and you might find the demographics of our community interesting:

- 55 percent are male
- 45 percent are female
- 26 percent are leaders of color
- 50 percent are principals
- 17 percent are assistant principals
- 16 percent are central office leaders
- 16 percent are instructional coaches or deans

Our members are “Ruckus Makers,” which I define as “out-of-the-box leaders who make change happen in education.”<sup>23</sup> Later in this chapter I will introduce a “mindset scorecard” that illustrates the kind of leaders we love to serve in the mastermind.

Lizzy, an American citizen leading a Nepalese school, connects with the idea of being a Ruckus Maker. It attracted her to the group. In fact, she connected with this message I sent her via email:

If you have ever thought, “Am I crazy?” because your dreams and vision for education are so innovative and bold, then we have a community of leaders just like you.

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<sup>23</sup>It’s time for another giveaway. We have some great Ruckus Maker swag at the Better Leaders Better Schools store. Be the first reader to post a *video* review of this book and I’ll send you a shirt or a hat (or maybe both). Send your video review and a link to where you posted your review to [daniel@betterleadersbetterschools.com](mailto:daniel@betterleadersbetterschools.com) to get your swag.

You're not crazy.

You're a Ruckus Maker making a difference.  
(Bauer, personal communication, May 12, 2020)

Lizzy responded to this communication this way:

This is what sets your brand apart from everyone else. It's not just about mastery of principles or systems, feedback conversations, or social skills as a leader—which are all important! It's about pushing the envelope, finding others who are doing the same, and becoming a better leader by working on the whole package of who you are. It's a place for outliers and risk-takers. (Neiger, personal communication, May 12, 2020)

Thank you, Lizzy, I couldn't have said it better myself!

This is our community. Thought leaders have been calling for disruption in education for a long time. In 2020, COVID-19 and the reality of systemic racism disrupted education whether it was ready or not.<sup>24</sup> The Better Leaders Better Schools mastermind is designed to connect innovative leaders who are willing to take risks that make education better. Speaking of innovative leaders, let's look at the characteristics and mindsets of ideal mastermind members next.

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The Better  
Leaders  
Better Schools  
mastermind  
is designed  
to connect  
innovative  
leaders who  
are willing  
to take risks  
that make  
education  
better.

<sup>24</sup>We were ready. Since 2016 the mastermind had been connecting on Zoom, so each member felt comfortable switching to a hybrid and virtual setting. It wasn't easy, but our leaders were prepared. We also talk about tough issues—including equity and racism—and our members are creating schools that are welcoming environments and beacons of compassion in their communities.

## The Ideal Member

### Leadership Mindset

According to Duke (2019, pp. 78–84), we make decisions based on what we believe, which leads to either a positive or a negative outcome. Leaders also struggle to separate the quality of a decision from the outcome. It is much easier to say we made a bad decision when the outcome is also poor. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case. Leaders can make great decisions that lead to a negative outcome, and this happens more frequently than we want to acknowledge. Another wrinkle is that many outcomes are completely out of our control. Can a school leader really move the needle on attendance, discipline, and achievement? Of course they can with a great amount of skill, but we must not forget that so many of our outcomes are out of our direct control and, in reality, are influenced by luck.

I agree that our beliefs are what drive our actions and inform our decisions. When I consider the kinds of leaders who have joined the mastermind, I look for the commonalities when it comes to beliefs, which I call mindset.

Getting it together mentally . . . involves the learning of several internal skills: 1) learning how to get the clearest possible picture of your desired outcomes; 2) learning how to trust [yourself] to perform . . . and learn from both successes and failures; 3) learning to see “nonjudgmentally”—that is, to see what is happening rather than merely noticing how well or how badly it is happening. This overcomes “trying too hard.” All these skills are subsidiary to the master skill, without which nothing of value is ever achieved: the art of relaxed concentration. (Gallwey, 1975/2015, p. 13)

There are twelve mindsets that mastermind members share. First, I will describe in detail what these mindsets are and then I will share a tool we call the “mindset scorecard.”<sup>25</sup> This tool is invaluable in that it breaks down each mindset across a continuum of 1–12 points for each mindset. What also makes the scorecard helpful is that leaders can score where they currently are in relation to each mindset and where they want to go. The tension produced by looking at the gap between present and future opens a discussion and path forward for leaders to take in their professional growth. Later, in Chapter 5, we will look at the scorecard again to explore how we use it to challenge our members and filter applicants to our community.

### The Ideal Leader

Not everyone is going to have a seat on the bus. There is definitely an ideal leader who we want to join our community. Our ideal member is a Ruckus Maker—an out-of-the-box leader who makes change happen in education. But in addition to this foundational posture, an ideal mastermind member also exemplifies the following mindset qualities.

**Generous.** It’s very important that leaders in our community have a generous spirit. School leaders apply to the mastermind regularly, and the next step is basically an interview. The school leader wants to answer, “Is the mastermind the right professional development opportunity for me?” At the same time, I wonder, “Will this leader add value to our community?” From time to time, I meet a leader with the wrong point of view. They are only interested in what the mastermind is going to

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<sup>25</sup> I learned to develop a mindset scorecard from Dan Sullivan, who runs Strategic Coach®, an organization that provides business coaching for growth-minded entrepreneurs.

do for them. The value of joining a global network of innovative school leaders should be clear. What I look for in an ideal candidate is that they are showing up ready to give. They know that by adding value to the community, the rest will take care of itself and whatever way they are looking to develop will come back to them if they focus on serving first.

**Hunger.** This equates to a *desire to learn* and a *hunger to level up*. Some leaders tell me either they don't read or they don't have time for it. That is a warning flag to me. Harry S Truman said, "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers." Time and again, mastermind members thank me for the books we read and other materials I share that help them grow. Reading doesn't have to be the main mode. I know there are different ways people like to learn. It is integral that our mastermind members have a strong desire to continue to grow. Staying stagnant is not an option.

Wanting to develop their skills or grow their capacity usually follows a strong desire to learn. The reason why isn't as important to me, but all of our community members know that they can have a greater impact in the world, and the way to get there is to level up their skill set. Top performers are keenly aware of what is in their control, and one of the most leverageable actions a leader can take is to get better. Comfortable leaders should not apply to our community, which brings us to the next point on feedback.

**Welcomes Feedback.** One of the best ways to develop your leadership capacity is through candid feedback loops. Some leaders don't want honest feedback. This is where the idea of a "yes" man or woman comes into play. A choice every leader makes is who they surround themselves with. The most effective leaders build a team that pushes back on ideas to make them better

as well as shares what TJ Vari and Joseph Jones call *candid and compassionate feedback*. This kind of feedback is aimed at helping an individual grow, but at times it may sting like a good workout. At the time it may not feel great, but we know that in the end it will make us better.

**Candid.** If you want to pretend how great you are, then spend more time on social media and tell the world. What we are looking for in the mastermind are leaders who can be candid with themselves and with other members. It's important to be honest with ourselves so that we can identify how and why we want to grow. It's also important so that we aren't choosing to live with blind spots. Candor is valuable when providing feedback to others as well. I call this "spinach in your teeth" behavior. If we were out to eat and I had spinach in my teeth, I would want you to tell me. Mastermind members are the ones who break through uncomfortable silence to say what needs to be said in order to be helpful.

**Open-minded.** One main reason leaders join the mastermind is that they are aware of the groupthink that exists within their district and they want to expose themselves to new ideas. Whether it is the financial corruption of a company like Enron, or the way Volkswagen cheated emissions tests in order to sell more cars, cultures do exist in a bubble—even positive ones. A great way to become a better leader is to network with other leaders who do things differently, maybe even better. By exposing themselves to new ideas weekly, mastermind members bring a fresh perspective back to their bubbles and show different ways of making education better.

**Collaborative.** There is an African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The mastermind is communal. We believe

that all of us are better than any of us. Leading in isolation is a choice and the greatest enemy of excellence. Our members know that the smartest person in the room is the collective wisdom of the room itself. Ideal mastermind members want to collaborate because they know that in order to be their best, they can't operate alone.

**Excellence.** We don't work with leaders on a professional improvement plan. That is an edge we chose. Steve Jobs said that A players want to be around other A players. Surrounding A players with B- or C-quality individuals is a sure-fire way to demotivate high-performing leaders. If you do this, they will leave. We want high-performing school leaders in our community who will push each other to be remarkable. We want our community to feel different from what leaders may experience in their home districts. One superintendent told me that he paid for one principal's membership because that leader had maximized every leadership development opportunity available within the district. Like a great teacher, this superintendent differentiated how he offered professional development to his top principals, and they have thrived in our community.

**Antiracist.** I wish this was common sense, but it's not. Our community works diligently to dismantle white supremacy culture and systemic racism within the schools our members lead. Our country is diverse, and we will meet the needs of all students by creating safe, supportive, and compassionate environments that offer a culturally relevant and authentic learning experience.

**Emotional Intelligence.** We want leaders who are internally and externally aware. This is a baseline requirement to participate in our community because emotionally unintelligent leaders are toxic and harm cultures by choice or unintentionally. We have created a special place and protect that by bringing in the right kind of leaders.

**Ownership.** Individuals who say “I accept no responsibility” are leaders in title only. Mastermind members work hard at sharing everything, warts and all, because they value critical feedback that will push them to be better. Part of that is accepting responsibility for mistakes made. In the context of restorative practices, we talk about the harm that is caused as a result of our choices. Part of taking ownership is repairing relationships when harm is caused. Another way to accept responsibility is to be candid with yourself, reflecting on the errors made during the day. You can ask yourself two helpful questions: What could I have changed to make my day better? and What did I learn from the mistakes I made today? The Stoic, Epictetus, recommended at the end of every day to meditate on these questions:

*Let not sleep descend on your weary eyes*

*Before having reviewed every action of the day.*

*Where did I go wrong? What did I do? What duty to leave undone?*

*Starting here, review your actions, and afterward,*

*Blame yourself for what is badly done, and rejoice in the good (Epictetus, ca. 108/2014, p. 163).*

It’s not a matter of whether we are going to make mistakes each day; what matters is what we learn from them.

Another part of taking ownership is being *solutions-focused*. The mastermind is not the faculty lounge, nor is it a private social media group. A pet peeve of mine is people who complain. Discussing what is wrong is easy to do; it’s much harder to be a person of action and one who is solution-focused. That doesn’t mean that our members don’t get upset and need time to vent. We create a safe space within the mastermind where

everyone can be themselves 100 percent, but with every discussion of transgression we want to move quickly to what we can do about it. Many things are out of control. Those that fall outside our influence we need to let go of fully. What is in our control is where our focus then turns and we commit to working to find a solution.

**Goals.** It's amazing to me how many leaders haven't taken the time to create precise goals that meaningfully inform and direct their work each and every day. Many leaders we support through the mastermind do have goals, but allow the "tyranny of the urgent" and other obstacles to sidetrack their ability to follow through on these goals. We help leaders move from that place of frustration to one of focus. Goals should be priorities, and everything else other than a true subset of actual, predetermined emergencies can wait.

**Compassion.** Top performers integrate their personal and professional lives. It is a myth that leaders should not mix the personal and professional, and it is counterproductive to do so. Every human being is a complex and beautiful creature. What happens outside of work influences the *actual* work we do. There is no denying that, and leaders who don't recognize this aren't operating in reality. Worse, your staff *wants* to connect with you. That doesn't mean you are friends with everyone outside of school, but it does mean that your staff knows you care. By building relational capital, the staff you serve will be willing to run through a wall for you, not out of blind obedience but because they care about you and the mission of the school. Theodore Roosevelt's saying, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," is helpful here.

### The Mindset Scorecard

Figure 2.1 shows the mindset scorecard. After a leader applies to join our mastermind, I ask them to complete

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this scorecard to get a sense of where they are in their leadership. There is no “right” score that guarantees a leader is approved for membership. What I love about this tool is that not only is it robust, but it includes a present versus future component. This allows the leader to reflect on where they are currently and where they want to go. It also helps me understand where a leader sees themselves, and what we can work on through the mastermind to improve their mindset.<sup>26</sup> We’ll revisit the mastermind scorecard again in Chapter 5.

### The Application

One tool I use to filter potential mastermind members is the application. It’s a short process that takes about nine minutes to complete. Like the mindset scorecard, I use this tool to challenge leaders to reflect on where they are as a leader. I also want to slow the process down and cause some friction for a leader to join. By slowing the process down, leaders who want to plug into the mastermind experience continue, and those who give up obviously aren’t prioritizing their leadership development. For example, Bill Renner joined the mastermind in 2021 after hearing about it for four years. Since 2016, Bill knew this was the professional development experience he was looking for, but the timing wasn’t right. His wife is a working professional, and his kids were at an age that they needed adult supervision after school hours. Four years later, his kids were old enough to experience some more independence and the timing was right for Bill and his wife. During our strategy call, Bill told me more about the mastermind than any other leader I’ve spoken with on an exploratory call. He had done his homework, and

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<sup>26</sup>I also challenge you, Dear Reader, to complete this scorecard and share your results with [mastermind@betterleadersbetterschools.com](mailto:mastermind@betterleadersbetterschools.com). Someone on my team will reach out and offer a complimentary coaching call to help you develop a plan to improve your leadership mindset.

Figure 2.1 Mastermind Mindset Scorecard

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	NOW	NEXT		
GENEROUS	You are a taker. Sharing resources is scary. You see the world in terms of scarcity.	You are a taker who sometimes gives when the outcome of generosity benefits you. You believe, "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."	You say "No" too easily to growth opportunities. Obstacles block you from professional development rather than opportunities to navigate around.	You are a giver. Generosity comes naturally, but at a cost when you violate personal boundaries in order to help. This zaps your energy and ability to have more impact.	You invest in opportunities that require minimal resources. Social media, podcasts, & free workshops are enough for you. A lack of prioritizing your growth is hindering your ability to maximize your performance.	You actively seek out feedback and have developed great trust with peers who have permission to challenge you to be better.	You see the world as more than black and white. However, you lack intentional tools to gather diverse opinions and slow your thinking down.	You value collaboration and gathering people comes naturally. The groups you form are homogeneous.	You do all things with excellence. This comes at a cost because you are not able to let some things go. It's hard to separate the forest from the trees.	You see abundance everywhere. Generosity comes naturally and you look for ways to share resources. You honor individual boundaries so that you can be even more generous at appropriate times.	You search for the best growth experiences. You find creative solutions to enroll in programs you identify as worthy of investment. What fuels you is a desire to be the best version of yourself.	You deliberately consider feedback and use systems to learn from both positive and negative outcomes. You have access to multiple feedback loops. You share what you are learning with your peers.	You consistently care personally and challenge directly.	You demonstrate curiosity in every situation and use tools to slow your thinking and suspend judgment. You demonstrate empathy and seek out counter-narratives to balance your thinking.	You value collaboration and gathering people comes naturally. You are able to gather diverse groups of people.	Your goal is to do everything with excellence. You have a pre-determined list of items that must be done with excellence and are able to let go of tasks that don't matter in the "big picture."
HUNGER	You engage in professional development only when directed. You don't see value in opportunities that others find meaningful. You judge your peers' motives for seeking professional development.	You take action on feedback, but discount the value of feedback based on the messenger.	You demonstrate candor with a small group of peers who are in your comfort zone.	The world is black and white, but you are willing to work with others who don't share your perspective.	You collaborate when asked, but you don't actively seek collaboration.	You can create excellent work with great effort. This output is inconsistent.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.
ACHIEVES GOALS	You avoid feedback and discount the value of feedback shared with you.	Your message changes based on the environment and people around. You talk out of both sides of your mouth.	The world is black and white. You believe you are either right or wrong. You don't interact with peers who don't share your point-of-view.	You work in isolation.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	
OPEN-MINDED	You work in isolation.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	
COLLABORATIVE	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	
EXCELLENCE	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	Your work is consistently poor.	

ANTIRACIST	You are racist.	You are willing to acknowledge that racism exists, but for you it exists in the past or in other spaces. You are unwilling to admit that racism exists where you are.	You are self-aware and see where your actions contribute to inequity. You actively seek out ways to grow and understand others from different backgrounds. You speak up inconsistently when you experience something racist.	You are self-aware and see where your actions contribute to inequity. You actively seek out ways to grow and understand others from different backgrounds. You speak up when you experience something racist.	
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	When people ask who the “jerk” is in the organization, everyone says it is you.	You have either strong internal or external awareness, but you are not working at growing either of these areas.	You have either strong internal or external awareness. You actively work at strengthening your emotional intelligence.	You have both strong internal and external awareness. You actively work at strengthening your emotional intelligence. Peers come to you to learn how to grow in this area.	
OWNERSHIP	It is always someone else’s fault.	You take responsibility when you are uncomfortable or forced to take responsibility because someone of authority makes you.	You take ownership when you are at fault and can do so unprompted.	You take ownership in all situations. Even when someone else is clearly at fault, you are able to identify where you either contributed to the problem or where you could have done something better.	
GOALS	You lack authentic goals; if you have them at all they are done to fulfill compliance, but lack meaning for your work.	You have goals, but they are created to please others. They are what you think your boss, peers, or others you respect would want you to have.	You have clearly defined goals and work toward them. The tyranny of the urgent sidetracks your goals and you lose focus.	You have clearly defined and written goals. You share your goals and progress in public. You are able to teach others how to set and achieve goals. You demonstrate focus and urgent needs don’t sidetrack what is most important.	
COMPASSION	People describe you as cold and mean.	You believe the professional and personal must be separate. There is a palpable distance between you and colleagues.	You are compassionate and bring your full self to work. However, you don’t consistently share tough feedback because you care so much for others. Because of this, your motives are sometimes questioned.	You are warm and compassionate. People “know how much you care” and are open to your ideas. Because of your high regard for others you can share tough feedback. You integrate your personal and professional lives appropriately. People feel seen, heard, and connected because of your leadership.	0
				COMPASSION	0

for him, joining the mastermind was a slow and deliberate process. This also means that when he eventually decided to join, he was “all in.”

On the application, I ask for contact information and in which group a leader is interested. I won't share those here in the book. The following are the long-form questions I use on the application to get to know the applicant and a brief explanation of why I use them.

***Where are you going? Tell us about your goals over the next year.***

As I mentioned in the mindset section prior to this, a shocking number of leaders do not have concrete goals that guide their yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly, and daily work. Seneca said, “If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.” This quote is usually used in reference to vision, and goals are a derivative of vision. The other common challenge I see is that leaders have, in fact, identified concrete goals, but they allow other people's priorities and emergencies to pull them away from what they've determined as most important. There are a variety of reasons for the lack of focus and execution. This section gives me a sense of what applicants to the mastermind have set out to achieve. It also shows me how big (or small) they are playing in terms of goals.

***Leaders join the mastermind to level up. Tell us about a time of significant personal growth. Why are you looking to grow right now?***

This question helps me understand what leaders have done to inspire growth in the past. I also learn how invested they are in their growth. Attending an annual conference is one thing. Investing in a nine-day leadership intensive is quite another. This question also helps me see

from the applicants' point of view what they consider growth and how they have been developing themselves over the years.

***During the "hot seat" in the mastermind meeting, leaders help each other solve significant challenges. What challenge(s) do you face and could you use support with currently?*** These challenges can be real or perceived. The obstacles question gives me a hint of how we need to serve this leader in the mastermind and if there is an opportunity for any quick wins. Alex identified the following as the obstacles on his leadership journey:

"We are a high-performing school but with little, to no, *intentional* processes. It is hard to get movement out of people who have consistently been a part of one of the top schools in the state but the cycle of continuous improvement has to begin so that we can reach even greater heights. I am the lone administrator in the building (along with a full-time counselor) so the weight of instructional leadership falls squarely on my shoulders. This requires me to hone my skills to an even greater level because we have so few areas of glaring weakness as a school. I am trying to navigate taking a good school to a great school and feel isolated in the process."

***When considering your application, is there anything else you'd like us to know?*** This is actually my favorite question. Many leaders use this open-ended question to tell me more about their professional experience, but I absolutely love it when an applicant shares something personal or, better yet, creative that I'm not expecting.

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This is a great way for a leader to set themselves apart from other potential mastermind members.

If you're thinking about starting a mastermind and choose to use an application, consider what you might ask. The purpose of mine is to build a small hoop to jump through that can act as a filter for potential members. Since the most important questions are open-ended, I can see if some of our values come through in the application. From here I invite the applicant to a 30-minute exploratory call to decide on whether or not to offer the leader a seat at our table in the mastermind. I'll explain that next.

### ***Why do you want to join the mastermind?***

Everyone has a reason. This tells me what they see as the value of what our community offers. Here is how Brandon answers this question:

“Building administration is a lonely gig, and I don't want to accept that as ‘what it is.’ I want to be my best as a school leader because I have great staff and great kids, both in need of a lot of support. I also need to be my best as a dad, and I often feel like putting what I do into the school pulls me away (both physically and mentally). What better way to hit all of these issues than to be in touch with peers who are living it or have lived it? There are too many people out there crushing this game for me to travel this journey alone!”

What I like about Brandon's response is that he is clearly hungry and knows there is a “better way” of leading in a community versus isolation.

## The Model

### **Everyone Wins When a Leader Gets Better. Everyone Wins When You Get Better.**

Years ago Simon Sinek created a TED talk that went viral—this was his famous “Start with the Why” or Golden Circle talk. The idea is simple yet profound. According to Sinek, organizations have it all wrong. Instead of leading with what they offer—the service, product, or widget, they should instead lead with the why. Schools should do the same. Of course, all schools want all students to achieve at a high level and become responsible members of society, but what is the why that drives it all?

The logic behind Sinek’s talk is that people don’t care about what you do or what you offer. Instead, they care about why you are doing it, how you are doing it, and then what you actually do. In the TED talk, Sinek uses the example of Apple.

Apple’s why: Everything we do, we believe in challenging the status quo, we believe in thinking differently.

Apple’s how: We make products that are beautifully designed and user-friendly.

Apple’s what: We just happen to make great computers—do you want to buy one?

I cannot emphasize enough how important the golden circle is to organizational life and success. It is what has propelled the mastermind and the work done at Better Leaders Better Schools. Take time to think deeply about the why-how-what of your work if you want your staff to own the vision and make it a reality. It works for Apple. It has worked for us at Better Leaders Better Schools, and it will work for you.

Our why: We believe, “Everyone wins when a leader gets better. Everyone wins when you get better.”

Our how: We do this through creating an environment where leaders can be authentic, experience belonging, and be challenged to grow.

Our what: We call this leadership community “the mastermind.” Do you want to join?

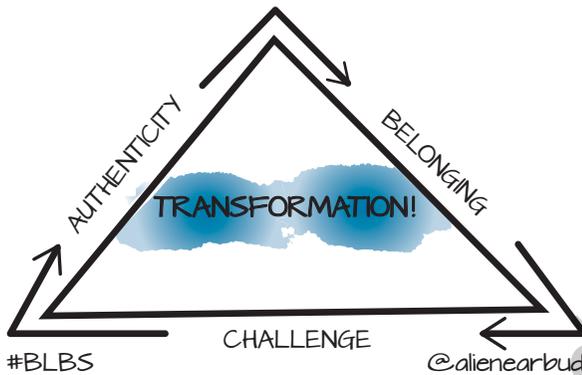
I share these examples so that you can apply them to your leadership and organization. The golden circle can also act as a filter when evaluating what professional development opportunities to create. The “what” of professional development is easy to see: books, online summits, in-person conferences, PLCs, individual coaches, and so on. The “what” is also easy to offer. The “why” and the “how” separate experiences and communicate how they are different with intentionality.

Now that we know the golden circle for Better Leaders Better Schools, let’s take a look at the ABCs of powerful professional development™.

Chapter 1 discussed many of the ways that professional development comes up short, the problem of isolation in school leadership, and many of the opportunities missed in districts each day. Although these professional development ills are prevalent, they don’t have to be permanent. Creating powerful professional development is as simple as ABC (Figure 2.2); this is how I built the mastermind at Better Leaders Better Schools. A stands for authenticity; B represents belonging; and C is for challenge. In my experience, putting together all these components leads to personal and professional transformation in a school leader’s life.

Authenticity + Belonging + Challenge =  
Transformation

**Figure 2.2** The ABCs of Powerful Professional Development™



In Part II, we will look at why these ABCs lead to a transformational experience for school leaders. Authenticity matters because leaders need a place where they can be themselves, without judgment. In this kind of environment they can freely admit what they don't know and ask for help. They can also celebrate their wins without worrying others will think they are an egomaniac. Belonging is central to powerful professional development as well. One of the most common challenges a school leader faces is isolation. That can be due to a myriad of reasons, so providing a space where people feel accepted, connected, seen, and heard is invaluable. It's like the Bull and Finch Pub.<sup>27</sup> Finally, leaders want to grow. They want to be challenged and pushed to take their skills to the

<sup>27</sup> The Bull and Finch Pub was the inspiration for the popular American sitcom called *Cheers*. This show ran for eleven years from 1982–1993. The theme song was titled, “Where Everyone Knows Your Name” and illustrates the importance of belonging. In my lifetime, various churches, my fraternity in college, the gym where I worked out, local coffee shops, and a local watering hole have all served as places that provided relationships and community for me.

next level. Just like Galileo's theory of relativity, leaders who join the mastermind do so because they know that inaction—staying in place—is actually regression. If they aren't growing, they are regressing. If everyone wins when you get better, you owe it to your community to develop yourself as much as possible.

Districts can encourage leaders to keep progressing by providing the resources and committing to their development.

### **Greatest Investments**

Leadership development is worth a district's investment of time and financial resources. Leaders who participate in leadership training improve their leadership versus those who do not (Tafvelin et al., 2019, p. 34). The idea that leaders grow when engaging in leadership training seems like common sense, and it is. Unfortunately, it is not common practice.

My lived experience as a local school leader taught this to me. I experienced "leadership" meetings to be bureaucratic boredom sessions focused on attendance, discipline, and student achievement rather than the real work of a leader (e.g., crafting a meaningful vision, navigating difficult conversations, or dismantling systemic racism within the school).

So when the district didn't provide leadership training, I created my own path in 2015 by launching the *Better Leaders Better Schools* podcast. I figured if I learned from the successes and failures of other leaders, and took action on just one idea, then my leadership skills would grow. This proved to be true over hundreds of episodes and millions of downloads later.

Transformational leadership theory teaches us that leadership training influences leadership behavior in countless ways. Leaders are able to reframe stressful situations and see them as opportunities for growth; they replace the feeling of isolation with one of connectedness, and they learn to listen carefully and respond to the needs of their staff (Tafvelin et al., 2019, p. 35). The mastermind is a great return on investment, and in this chapter, you have gotten a taste of what the mastermind is about and the model it is built on. Later, in Part II, we will dive deep into how professional development can include authenticity, belonging, and challenge in each experience.

When professional development is built on the ABCs, it leads to transformation. The rest of Part II will look at ways we make the mastermind an experience where leaders can be authentic, belong, get challenged, and ultimately transform. It is my hope that these ideas come across clearly so that you can apply them to professional development you facilitate and use them as a tool to evaluate future experiences you choose to invest in.

## Mastermind Case Study

Chris Horton

Principal in British Columbia, Canada



How many professional development events, conferences, or activities have had a long-term, powerful impact on your leadership or practice?

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

Based on my own experiences with professional development, I would guess very few. The ones that have had a lasting impact on my thinking and my practice all involved an ongoing connection to and accountability with a group of peers. I have always loved the energy, ideas, and ways of thinking that you hear at conferences and other one-off professional development. They can be inspiring, but they often turn into little action. For some who have that unique skill to take information/ideas and move them to action, they can be impactful. In many respects, when it comes to professional growth, that's not me.

Early in my administration career, I had the privilege to be involved in some professional learning that involved regular connections with a small group of three other school leaders to practice skills, hold each other accountable, and have professional conversations. After I completed these trainings, I realized the importance of the regular connection and relationship that is found in ongoing, continuous forms of professional learning. The timing of my discovery of the BLBS mastermind could not have been better.

The discovery of the mastermind was entirely by accident. I was surfing the internet looking for some ideas about some leadership topic, I don't even remember what it was exactly now. As I was searching, I came across this website called Better Leaders Better Schools. The title alone resonated with me. I wanted to be a better leader so that my school could be better. I spent time exploring the website and finding resources, and I started listening to the *Better Leaders Better Schools* podcast on my commute. As I listened to the podcast, Danny started mentioning this thing called the mastermind. His description intrigued me because it aligned with these previous powerful professional learning opportunities I had been involved in. I read more about it on the website, then reached out to Danny. I started in a group shortly after that. I have now been a member of a mastermind group for more than three years.

As I reflect on what the mastermind has meant to me and to my leadership, it is quite emotional. The mastermind took me from a young, immature leader to a more mature leader who has confidence in my leadership, my values, my beliefs, and my vision for learning. It was through the incredibly rich conversations with school leaders from a wide variety of walks of life, parts of the world, and experiences that this occurred. Every week, even when I'm not on the hot seat, I'm learning how to approach challenges, celebrate victories, and raise the bar on my own leadership. The mastermind has become a second family that I miss deeply when I am unable to attend even for a single week. They are my cheerleaders, my mentors, and my support system. I know that each of us would bend over backward to support another member through leadership and personal challenges. All this, and most of us have never even met in person. All this, and we also have Danny, our "fearless leader." He would never say he is our leader, but without him, none of this would be real. His passion for learning and leading, his humility, and his quiet (well, not always quiet) leadership serve as a foundation that makes the mastermind what it is to each of us. He continues to push all of us, provide sound advice, ask great questions, and push himself in his own leadership journey—a true mentor and role model.

I will never be the same, thank goodness, as a result of the mastermind and Danny Bauer. It brings tears of gratitude and joy to my eyes as I write this. I have been profoundly impacted and changed by this experience. I look forward to the next three (and hopefully more) years and what they will bring in my leadership and my life as I continue to engage in the mastermind. And I can't wait to meet everyone in person, to run up to them and give them a huge hug. They are, after all, my leadership family.

## Chapter 2 Reflection Questions

Think about the best professional development you have experienced. What made it work for you?

Look at the mindset scorecard and evaluate yourself. Where are you now? Where would you like to be in the future?<sup>28</sup>

Consider creating a mindset scorecard for your ideal staff member, student, and parent. If you accepted this challenge, how would you adapt what's on our scorecard for the purposes of your school?

What about the ABCs of powerful professional development™ do you relate to? Where do you see authenticity, belonging, and challenge show up in the professional development you experience? How do you integrate these components in your school or district?

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<sup>28</sup> As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, if you would benefit from a powerful coaching conversation on the mindset scorecard with a Better Leaders Better Schools expert coach, reach out to [mastermind@betterleadersbetterschools.com](mailto:mastermind@betterleadersbetterschools.com) and we'll follow up with how to set that up.