

Leadership plays a pivotal role in teacher agency because agency does not emerge simply from individual motivation. It is either enabled or constrained by the culture, structures, and expectations that leaders create.

If we genuinely believe that teachers are the designers of learning, then leadership must move beyond managing people and towards creating the conditions in which professional expertise can flourish.

1. Build Trust Before Accountability

Teacher agency begins with trust.

When leaders trust teachers as professionals, they create space for judgement, decision-making, and innovation. This doesn't mean abandoning accountability. Rather, accountability shifts from compliance with processes to evidence of impact on student learning.

Leaders can ask:

- What have you learned?
- What evidence are you using?
- How has student learning improved?
- What are you trying next?

instead of:

- Have you completed the required process?
- Have you followed the prescribed program?

The difference is profound.

2. Establish a Shared Vision for Learning

Agency is not everyone doing their own thing.

The most successful schools balance autonomy with alignment.

Teachers need clarity about:

- What learning matters most.
- What the school's educational philosophy is.
- What capabilities students need for the future.

Once the vision is clear, teachers should have flexibility in how they achieve it.

A school committed to critical thinking, inquiry, UDL, and interdisciplinary learning should encourage multiple pathways toward those outcomes.

3. Create Time for Professional Collaboration

Teacher agency flourishes collectively.

One of the greatest barriers to innovation is not resistance but lack of time.

Leaders who prioritise:

- Collaborative planning
- Lesson study
- Action research
- Curriculum design teams
- Cross-disciplinary projects

signal that professional thinking matters.

If we expect teachers to design future-focused learning, then collaboration cannot be an extra. It must become part of the work.

4. Encourage Responsible Risk-Taking

Innovation requires experimentation.

Yet many teachers work within cultures where mistakes are viewed negatively.

Effective leaders normalise questions such as:

- What did we try?
- What worked?
- What didn't work?
- What did we learn?

When failure becomes a source of learning rather than judgement, teachers are more willing to innovate.

This is particularly important if schools want to move beyond traditional models of curriculum and assessment.

5. Involve Teachers in Decisions

Nothing undermines agency faster than having decisions consistently made for educators rather than with them.

Teachers should be involved in:

- Curriculum design
- Assessment reform
- Strategic planning
- Professional learning priorities
- School improvement initiatives

People support what they help create.

The more ownership teachers have over direction, the greater their investment in achieving it.

6. Protect Professional Learning

Future-focused schools require future-focused educators.

Leaders build agency when they create opportunities for teachers to:

- Undertake action research
- Explore emerging pedagogies
- Investigate AI and its implications
- Engage with educational literature
- Share expertise with colleagues

Professional learning should not simply be about implementing initiatives. It should be about deepening expertise.

7. Model the Learning You Want to See

The most influential leaders are learners themselves.

If leaders expect teachers to:

- Be reflective
- Take risks
- Seek feedback
- Embrace innovation
- Adapt to change

then they must model those same dispositions.

Learning cultures are not created through strategic plans alone. They are created through example.

The Leadership Question of the Future

As we ask schools to develop learners who are curious, adaptable, creative, and capable of critical thinking, perhaps we need to ask a parallel question:

Do our leadership practices create those same conditions for teachers?

Because teacher agency is not a peripheral issue.

It may well be the foundation of every other educational aspiration we hold, from critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning to UDL, assessment reform, and preparing students for an AI-enabled future.

After all, schools cannot expect students to become empowered learners if the professionals leading them are not empowered to learn, innovate, and lead themselves.