

CSL Précis

Observing Impact: Leadership Insights from
Cale Birk's 2024 uLead Keynote



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During uLead 2024, Cale Birk's keynote on transformative school leadership profoundly inspired us. His concept of "observable impact" challenges us to redefine success through specific, actionable outcomes. It is about moving from "drift" to dynamic engagement, ensuring our leadership truly resonates within the school community.

Key Takeaways:

- **Three Dimensions of Impact:** Focus on students, teachers, and tasks to drive meaningful change.
- **Clarity Tests:** Goals must pass the Teenager, Civilian, and New Teacher Tests to ensure they are understood and actionable by all stakeholders.
- **Celebrate Progress:** Documenting and sharing achievements builds a culture of motivation and shared success.

Reflect: How do you measure your impact? Let's lead with clarity and purpose, fostering environments where innovation thrives.



Observing Impact: Leadership Insights from Cale Birk's uLead 2024 Keynote

The uLead 2024 conference, organized by the Council for School Leadership of the Alberta Teachers' Association, brought together educators and leaders to delve into transformative practices in school leadership. A standout moment of the event was Cale Birk's keynote address, a former principal who is now an educational consultant. His presentation delivered a compelling framework for generating observable impact within schools, urging leaders to rethink their measures of success while inspiring practical strategies to lead with clarity and purpose.

Birk's keynote transcended theoretical discussions; it served as a rallying cry, leaving attendees inspired and prepared to make significant changes in their schools.

From Drift to Impact: A Leader's Journey

Cale Birk's leadership path began as a biology teacher in Kamloops, British Columbia. His innovative tenure as principal in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) school attracted national recognition, particularly for his collaborative scheduling. It targeted intervention initiatives, which led to remarkable improvements in student achievement over five years.

During his keynote, Birk (2024), introduced the idea of "drift," describing a state where leaders feel disconnected or stagnant. This drift can surface as burnout, imposter syndrome, or "quiet quitting." Birk believes that the remedy for drift lies in critically examining practices and establishing clarity around one's impact.

Observable Impact: Leadership's True Measure

The heart of Birk's (2024) message revolves around observable impact, underscoring the necessity of defining and measuring success through specific, actionable outcomes. Birk (2024), asserts that effective leadership goes beyond merely managing tasks; it involves a proactive approach to transforming educational



practices to yield significant, measurable results that resonate throughout the school community.

To drive this transformation, Birk (2024), outlines what he calls the Three Dimensions of Observable Impact, essential for fostering meaningful change:

- **Students:** Establishing clear, specific, and measurable outcomes that detail students' expected actions and achievements is crucial. By setting these benchmarks, schools can monitor progress and gain insights into what influences student learning and development.
- **Teachers:** Identifying and nurturing effective teaching practices is necessary for enhancing student success. This includes recognizing proven strategies and ensuring all educators have the support and resources to implement these practices consistently.
- **Tasks:** Creating thoughtful tasks and assessments aligned with desired outcomes is vital for fostering an engaging learning environment. These tasks should encourage student collaboration and growth, ensuring assessments serve as evaluations and learning tools.

Birk (2024), strongly advocates for the collaborative process of co-creating these goals with teachers. By involving educators in the goal-setting process, schools can cultivate a shared sense of clarity and ownership, which is crucial for inspiring commitment and enthusiasm toward the school's vision for success. This collaborative effort strengthens the educational framework and enhances the overall effectiveness of leadership within the school.

The Three Tests for Clarity and Accountability

Birk (2024), presented three practical tests to ensure that educational goals are clear, actionable, and comprehensible to a wide range of stakeholders within the school community. These tests work to enhance understanding and promote collective commitment:

- **Teenager Test:** This test evaluates whether the goal can endure the scrutiny of a teenager. It challenges the goal's clarity and relevance by questioning if it



resonates with a skeptical young audience. If a teenager can appreciate the goal's importance and rationale, it will likely be robust and meaningful.

- **Civilian Test:** This evaluation determines if the goal is articulated in a manner that is understandable to anyone, regardless of their familiarity with the education sector. By employing plain language and avoiding jargon, this test ensures that the goal remains accessible to all community members, including parents and community leaders. This transparency fosters broader support and engagement.
- **New Teacher Test:** This test assesses whether a novice teacher with limited experience and knowledge can confidently and effectively implement the goal. It emphasizes the need for goals to be practical and straightforward so that all staff, regardless of expertise level, can integrate them seamlessly into everyday teaching practices.

Educators can convert abstract initiatives into specific, actionable steps by applying these tests. This approach enhances accountability and promotes clarity, ensuring everyone in the school community comprehends the goals and their significance.

Confronting Practice to Foster Growth

Birk (2024), encouraged leaders to reflect on their practices and motivate others to do the same—not as a form of criticism but as a means to promote continuous improvement. Birk (2024), highlighted the importance of creating safe experimentation, reflection, and dialogue spaces.

Strategies for Supporting Growth:

- **Differentiated Professional Development:** Customize opportunities to meet educators at their expertise and needs.
- **Focus on Small Changes:** Lower barriers to action by implementing one change at a time.
- **Empower Choice:** Provide autonomy through tools like choice boards, enabling educators to focus on areas most relevant to their growth.



Documentation for Dopamine: The Role of Reflection

One of Birk's (2024) most innovative concepts was "documentation for dopamine," which involves documenting and sharing evidence of impact to build collective efficacy. By systematically tracking and celebrating progress, educators and leaders can connect their actions to meaningful outcomes, fostering a sense of achievement and motivation.

Promising practices encourage educators to document specific actions, patterns, and results, creating a visible cycle of learning and improvement. This validates educators' hard work and nurtures a culture of shared knowledge and success.

Narrowing the Gap: Leading Through Complexity

Birk (2024) identified two significant challenges leaders often face in their roles:

- **The Tragic Gap:** This concept illustrates the stark contrast between current realities and the ideal future envisioned. Leaders must grapple with the limitations of resources, personnel, or circumstances that impede progress toward a more desirable outcome.
- **The Improvement Gap:** This challenge focuses on leaders' difficulties translating their high aspirations into concrete, actionable steps. While many leaders set lofty goals, these aspirations can remain elusive without a clear path to realization.

To effectively bridge these gaps, Birk (2024), proposed that leaders adopt the role of "chief converters." In this capacity, leaders should simplify complex and daunting challenges into manageable, measurable tasks. This approach enables the creation of clear strategies and actionable plans that empower teams to work toward the organization's ideals, thus gradually narrowing both the tragic and improvement gaps.



The Three Conversions:

- **Current Practices to Knowledge:** Start by thoroughly analyzing and clearly defining the impact of existing practices within the organization. This involves gathering data, soliciting feedback from team members, and assessing current methodologies to understand their effectiveness and areas for improvement. Establishing a clear baseline of knowledge allows leaders to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in current operations.
- **Knowledge to Action:** Once a solid understanding of current practices is established, the next step is to translate that knowledge into focused action. This requires narrowing the scope to prioritize the most critical issues and initiating small, manageable steps that are feasible for the team to implement. To ensure efficient progress tracking, these actions should adhere to the SMART criteria—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.
- **Actions to Outcomes:** After implementing the suggested actions, it is essential to reflect on the results. Evaluating measurable outcomes will help determine the effectiveness of the changes made. Sharing these results with the team fosters accountability and a sense of collective achievement. Celebrating successes, regardless of size, helps build momentum and encourages continued progress toward the organization's goals.

By utilizing this structured framework, leaders can systematically tackle challenges and convert their aspirations into tangible outcomes, driving meaningful progress within their teams and organizations.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Cale Birk's keynote address at the uLead 2024 conference was a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of effective leadership focused on measurable, observable impact. Birk (2024), stressed that school leaders are vital in cultivating environments where growth and innovation can thrive. Leaders can inspire and engage their teams and students by proactively addressing stagnation issues, clarifying their vision and goals, and actively celebrating and showcasing evidence of progress.



As educational leaders reflect on Birk’s insightful message, a pivotal question arises: How will you define and measure your impact on your school community? This question encourages leaders to thoughtfully consider the changes they wish to implement and the criteria they will use to evaluate their success.

To support leaders on this journey, the Council for School Leadership, in collaboration with the uLead conference, offers a wealth of valuable tools, resources, and professional development opportunities. These offerings equip leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary education and instigate meaningful change within their schools and communities. By engaging with these resources, leaders can amplify their influence and create lasting, positive outcomes for their students and staff.



References

Birk, C. (2024, April 14). Navigating the leadership drift: leading from the middle in today's schools [Conference presentation]. uLead 2024 Convention Banff, AB, Canada. <https://ulead.transistor.fm/>

